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Hickory Harry; or, The Trapper-Brigade's Spy.

BY HARRY ST. GEORGE,

AUTHOR OF "ROARING RALPH ROCKWOOD," "RATTLING RUBE," "DARING DAVY," "OLD HICKORY," ETC., ETC.



"I sha' not ask you again. Where are your Indians? Show the heathen up speedily or say your prayers, for Kansas Kate means business."

Hickory Harry;

OR,
THE TRAPPER-BRIGADE'S SPY.

A Tale of The Far North-west.

BY HARRY ST. GEORGE,
AUTHOR OF "ROARING RALPH ROCKWOOD,"
"RATTLING RUBE," "DARING DAVY,"
"OLD HICKORY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE RIVAL TRAPPERS.

MIDNIGHT!

The witching hour 'when graveyards yawn
and graves give up their dead.'

Far away in the wildest region of the North-west, where the grand forest stretches in an almost unbroken line to and beyond the Red River of the North, the full moon, soaring high in the cloudless heavens, gazed in cold silence down upon a sight that would have made the pulses of an observer beat with more than ordinary rapidity.

In a small glade where the great trees reared their lofty heads on all sides, two men had come face to face.

They were both dressed in buckskin and carried the usual weapons of trappers, though the rifle of one seemed to be more than the usual length.

This was the stirring time in the trapping grounds that tried men's souls, when the rival fur-companies fought each other with a venomous energy that could not have been excelled by the red-skins themselves, and when two members of these companies met in the forest, bad blood was sure to flow.

Unexpectedly these men had come face to face, each mistaking the other for a friend until it was too late to spring back among the trees.

The moon was shining her brightest but it is always a deceptive light. It is ludicrous to talk of distinguishing the difference between a white and red man half a mile away under such circumstances, when the truth is the keenest-eyed man on the border could never tell whether it was a wolf or a stump in his path fifty yards distant, on the brightest moonlight night.

Upon coming face to face, these two men uttered exclamations of astonishment and glared into each other's countenance as so many wolves, mad with hunger and ferocity might have done.

"Black Baptiste!"

"Hickory Harry!"

These names fell hissing from their lips, as if imbued with the same passion that made their eyes flash so madly, and their frames tremble like the strong oak in a storm.

For fully half a minute the two men stood thus, as if transformed into stone. Then, as if by mutual consent, they sprung back a pace, and it was evident that the man who could bring his rifle to bear first would win the fight.

The movements of both were almost lightning-like, but the tactics of the hunter with the long rifle gave him the advantage, for the moment. He made no attempt to bring the weapon to his shoulder, but, pulling back the hammer he thrust the rifle forward, so that when Black Baptiste looked up he found the muzzle frowning upon him.

Too well did he know his antagonist to provoke him into firing. If he sprung aside with the intention of distracting the other's aim, so that he might either have a chance to use his own weapon, or else seek shelter behind a neighboring tree, the chances were that the bullet would find his black heart, for there was not a man in the great North-west who could compete with Hickory Harry as a sure shot.

Strategy, then, must take the place of boldness, and might yet win the day.

"Hold!" he cried, quickly; "do not fire unless you are a coward. Let us settle this thing with the knife. See, I throw my rifle away, and my pistols follow suit. I am only armed with my knife, and I dare you to single combat!"

It was a taunt no brave man listened to in those days without taking up, and especially when proceeding from such a hated foe as this Hudson Bay trapper was.

For answer, the other dropped his rifle and drew his long knife.

Then he sprung forward and faced the man. To his intense surprise, Black Baptiste showed no eagerness to meet him, but gave vent to a

shrill whistle that echoed through the great woods.

The truth now burst upon his mind.

His enemy had friends close at hand, whom he desired to have a hand in the affair. Upon finding himself being worsted, the half-breed had resorted to cunning, and had managed to disarm him so far as his rifle was concerned.

Seeing his foe advancing with his intention plainly marked upon his countenance, Black Baptiste turned and fled like a coward through the forest.

The other was close at his heels, however, and when some fifty yards had been passed over, Black Baptiste was compelled to turn at bay for two reasons.

In the first place his pursuer had managed to gain, and would spring upon his back if he did not face him. The half-breed had good cause to both hate and fear this man beyond the usual degree one is apt to feel for an enemy, and he knew there was sufficient cause for Hickory Harry to forever end the feud between them if he once laid hands on his person.

There was also another excellent reason why the half-breed came to a sudden halt. He had dashed out from among the trees and found himself upon the very brink of the river bank, which at this particular point was all of forty feet in height.

Beyond there was a beautiful panorama spread out, seen dimly now through the strange mystic veil that enveloped all remote objects.

Below, the moonlight glinted from the surface of the moving water, which looked in places like a river of molten silver; but the half-breed had no eyes for such things just then.

As he came to a halt, and panting, wheeled in his tracks, the pursuer leaped upon him. The keen knives gleamed in the moonlight as they were drawn back for a stroke.

Then came the clash of steel as they met in mid-air, and such was the force of the collision that both weapons were hurled from the hands of their owners.

In addition to the loss of his only weapon, Black Baptiste had also received a severe gash from the blade of his antagonist, which actually severed one of his fingers.

In a life-and-death struggle such a catastrophe was of little moment, and Black Baptiste instantly closed with the other to avoid being hurled over the bank.

There they fought, like two tigers of the jungle, with bated breath and muscles strained to the utmost tension.

Once the half-breed let out his pent-up breath in a whoop that was intended to guide his followers to the scene if they were anywhere near, and the result justified his expectations, for out from the forest there rushed a swarm of lithe figures, that approached the spot with the leaps of a buck chased by the wolves.

Black Baptiste's antagonist saw them coming and knew that the next half minute of time would settle the whole matter.

To fall into the hands of these men would be equivalent to invoking a most frightful death, and sooner than allow such a catastrophe to occur, he was ready to risk a daring feat—that of plunging over the precipice into the cold river!

Both men were exerting themselves to the utmost in one direction—that of throwing each other and resisting at the same time.

When, however, Hickory Harry saw these silent figures bounding from out the forest aisles toward him, he suddenly changed his tactics, and jerked away from the half-breed, who, never dreaming of such an act, although prepared for almost any desperate deed on the part of his assailant, could not resist the impetus of the movement, and hence they separated.

To spring away and pick up his knife was but the work of a few seconds; still it allowed several of the silent shadows to rush up and come between him and the river.

He cast one rapid glance around him, saw that there was but one avenue of escape, with the chances against him even in that, and then sprung forward.

One man received the keen knife in his breast and reeled out of the way. Another was hurled over the precipice before he could raise a hand to defend himself, or move out of the way of the desperate trapper.

Upon the edge of the height the daring man came to a momentary pause. Then he turned, gave a yell of defiance, and sprung from the rock just as several guns sounded.

The men who glanced along these rifle-barrels were not in the habit of missing what they aimed at, but this was one who had met them in open conflict and at whom a bullet had been

fired in secret full many a time, and who seemed to bear a charmed life, so that they were never ready to swear they had struck him.

Led by Black Baptiste, their leader, still panting from his recent hard tussle, the trappers one and all rushed to the edge of the steep bluff, and looked over.

Even as they started to do so, the second splash told them that their hated enemy had struck the water, and the moonlight showed them the gradually widening circles.

Rifles were lowered so as to command all points, and they waited. Keen, cat-like orbs surveyed the surface of the water, and it seemed as though the man they hunted would rise to doom if he but thrust his head above the surface.

"Peste! have a care you do not shoot Jean," growled Black Baptiste.

Sure enough, one of their comrades had gone down, and but for this warning they might have sent a bullet through their comrade's head and then given the cunning enemy a chance to escape.

Would their foeman swim up-stream?

Perhaps the fall had stunned or killed him outright! Forty feet was no small distance, and although the river looked free from rocks below, yet it might be treacherous beneath the surface.

Where could he have gone?

Even as the question entered the brain of the half-breed, voices reached their ears, the voices of men engaged in mortal combat. Accompanying them came a splashing that speedily drew their attention to the scene of the disturbance.

Some little distance down the stream two men were locked in each other's arms, and engaged in a death-struggle. It was Hickory Harry and Jean, the man he had pushed over the bluffs. Fate had drawn them together even under the water.

Some of the trappers bounded away to gain a point where they could descend to the water's edge, while the rest held their rifles ready in grim silence.

CHAPTER II.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

THE situation was enough to alarm any but a reckless man.

Even should the hunter escape those below he would be at the mercy of the rifles on the bluff, and besides, he had to contend with a man of no mean strength in the water.

When he sprung from the rock out into the air Hickory Harry had no idea as to how he should elude his foes.

Striking the water he shot beneath the surface and went down to the very bottom. Then the current bore him along down the stream. Some strange fate brought the two men together who had made the plunge, and as they arced to the surface they naturally grappled.

The struggle was fierce and more tigerlike than that between Hickory Harry and Black Baptiste, for the terrible fall, the plunge beneath the water, and this unexpected encounter had rendered both men more than usually desperate, and they fought with the ferocity of madmen or fiends.

The beleaguered hunter had left his knife in the body of the man on the bluff, so that he carried no weapon saving his pistols, and the water had already rendered these useless.

It chanced that the marksmen above fired just a second too late, and the result of this was that their bullets failed to find lodging places in the body of the trapper whom Black Baptiste had such cause to hate.

The man with whom Hickory Harry struggled was a burly Canadian, dark-skinned, and powerful as an ox. His sudden fall had dazed him some—more than his opponent had felt as a result of his leap, for it was intentional with him—but he was alive to the fact that his life was in danger, and fought with the fury of a panther.

Somehow or other he managed to draw his knife, and but for the other's catching his arm in a vise-like grip would have used it to advantage.

They thrashed the water like a pair of dolphins, underneath the surface about as often as they were above it, and continually descending the stream.

So far the fight seemed equal enough, but in one way the trapper chief was exercising his cunning.

He had seen the friends of his enemy making their way down the steep bluff, with the intention of gaining the bank and taking a hand in the affair. As such a course would be ruinous to him, all the while he struggled, he was gradually urging the other toward the opposite

shore, which began to grow higher all the while until, a little distance further down, the river ran through a deep cut where the sun seldom entered.

With a weaker antagonist the young trapper might have pursued some wily game, such as keeping up the struggle until a point was reached that promised comparative safety, but his most immediate danger lay in this burly, dark-featured Canadian, whom it behooved him to get rid of at the first opportunity.

Both men were far from being fresh, but this rendered the combat more even. They panted for breath, took in mouthfuls of water, which, however, they were prevented from swallowing by the fact that their throats were held by hostile hands, and churned the stream in the immediate vicinity into foam.

By the time the men on the bank had reached the water's edge, the writhing, plunging and desperate combatants had planted their feet on a rock near the opposite side of the stream.

They were up to their necks in water, and what with the splashing and twisting, none of those on the solid ground could tell which was friend and which foe, so they still had to retain their fire.

Two of the human wolves, eager to take a hand in the bloody game, sprung into the water with the intention of reaching the combatants and assisting their comrade, but they found it a more difficult job than they had expected.

Underneath the surface at this point the current ran very strong, already feeling the influence of the inclined plane in the canyon where it rushed along with the speed of a mill-race, and having jumped into the river at a point even with the rock that served as a foothold for the two foes, these men were swept further down the stream in spite of their strenuous efforts to stem the current; and before they could land they had been swept into the gloomy canyon where fresh dangers and difficulties awaited them.

Meanwhile the conflict waged fierce and strong between the two mortal foes, standing upon the rock and up to their necks in water.

Seeing the discomfiture of their two comrades, the rest did not attempt to interfere except as far as keeping a watch upon the men went; but, if the trapper-chief came out victor he would have to look out sharply if he did not wish to receive several bullets in his head.

On the impulse of the moment Hickory Harry had conceived his plan, which he promptly carried into execution, with a success that was encouraging, to say the least.

With a sudden movement he compressed his iron fingers upon the throat of his dark-skinned foeman, pushing him back at the same time, so that he would have slipped from his foothold on the rock but that the current acted as a counter, and helped him maintain his position.

Just as abruptly the other jerked away from him, releasing his own throat and freeing his enemy from his iron grip.

Quick as a flash Harry snatched the blade from the hand which his antagonist held aloft, and before those on the shore could begin to comprehend his action, he had plunged the blade once, twice, thrice, into the breast of the Canadian.

A mocking shout pealed over the surface of the water—a shout in which defiance was mingled with disdain, and which was enough to make the blood of every hearer boil with fury.

With the ready blade still in possession he vanished from view beneath the surface of the water. Instantly the wildest commotion was visible among the Hudson Bay trappers. Those on the bluff threw themselves flat, and with rifles poking over the fringe of grass, watched keenly for a sign of the reckless man who refused to either give in or allow himself to be shot.

Upon the bank below the men ran in the direction of the canyon, but their progress was soon barred with great rocks that reared their ugly heads, so they turned their attention once more to the stream.

Several rifles sounded above, but the marksmen soon ascertained that they had fired at the body of their defunct comrade—for, what with the terrible stab she had received after his fall and struggle, the action of the water and bullets of his friends, sent by mistake, it might be set down as pretty certain that the Canadian was a very dead man.

Almost a minute had passed by, and it seemed out of the question for a man to remain much longer under water. He must come up to meet their bullets, or else cling to a rock on the bottom and let death overtake him in that way.

The two banks were destitute of bushes, so

that the usual tricks of men in such a situation could not be brought into play, and even if this were not so, there were men among those who hunted him fully his equal in woodcraft and cunning, and up to him in anything pertaining to prairie lore.

While one of the men on the bluff was reloading his rifle, he uttered an exclamation, and aiming the piece, hastily fired. From the border of the canyon there came back a cry of derision, and the others caught a momentary glimpse of a head in the swift-flowing water at the mouth of the defile.

Even as they looked it was swept into the gloomy depths where the moonlight could not pierce, and Hickory Harry had gone upon the same trail taken by the two men whom the current had swept into the canyon a few minutes before.

Black Baptiste was frantic.

Still he seemed to have his senses about him as was evinced by the strategic movements inaugurated under his immediate orders and supervision.

He knew the nature of the country, and that the canyon was not a very extensive one. Three men were sent post-haste to the lower terminus, with orders to keep a keen look-out and give the intrepid fugitive the benefit of their guns if he made his appearance.

Men were also stationed at intervals along the high bluff forming the left bank of the defile, who could keep watch upon both sides so long as the moon held forth. With the remainder, the half-breed set to work earnestly.

Dead or alive he wanted the body of his foe.

He made his way down to the mouth of the canyon and found that it could be entered by creeping carefully along the rocks. This was good enough; still Black Baptiste was not fully satisfied, for the man he sought had been much nearer the other shore than this one, and if he had landed at all it must be across the water.

Seeing the difficulty, one of his men volunteered to lead several of them across, and at once made up the stream. When they reached a certain point, the daring man fastened a lariat around his body and immediately plunged into the water. At this point the current did not look very violent, but they knew the undercurrent was strong.

By vigorous swimming the trapper reached the opposite bank. The water was chilly, but no ice had been formed as yet so that it was not actually benumbing.

It was not hard work for the others to cross when the rope was fastened to rocks on each side, and in a short time they were making their way into the shadows of the canyon.

Meantime, what had become of the reckless Hickory Harry?

When he gave that yell of derision at the poor shot of the trapper upon the bluff, he found himself within the confines of the defile. It was no strange place to him, for he knew its deadly dangers too well.

Fortunately for him he was close to the grim wall that rose up almost a hundred feet above his head, and his whole strength was bent toward effecting a landing of some sort.

After much labor this was finally accomplished, but he was so exhausted from his violent exertions that for several minutes he lay upon the shelf of rock recovering his breath.

No man knew better than the young trapper that his enemies were no better than wolves, and that, once upon his track, they would not leave until assured of his death. The idea of his being left where he was unmolested never entered his mind.

By the time he was ready to commence operations, he saw the figures upon the top of the opposite wall, and knew that every effort was to be made toward effecting his destruction.

It was a desperate feat, trying to scale that terrible wall in the gloom that surrounded him, but he was just the man to risk it. Up he climbed, now finding a narrow and rude path, and anon clambering along the face of a bare-faced rock.

He could soon hear his enemies below him, and realized that they were on his track, having struck the narrow ledge that led up the face of the wall, and up which he was now moving.

Whether they had seen him or not he could not say, but it seemed as though they were pursuing him, though he could not imagine why they had not put an end to him at once, unless it was because their firearms had become wet in crossing the river.

He was now fully sixty feet from the mad river below, and half that distance from the top

of the wall. The ledge which he had struck seemed to be leading him somewhere, but he had no idea what his destination would be.

Somehow the pursuers seemed to gain upon him, and as it could not be because of their familiarity with the route, his weariness must be the prime cause.

Nerved to desperation by their proximity he struggled on, but the path grew more difficult, and in places he was compelled to make use of his hands in order to secure a firm footing.

While he was thus toiling up the ledge, he suddenly became aware that his further progress was blocked. The manner in which he found this out was not very pleasant, for his hand fell upon a warm body covered with a coating of hair, and he started back in time to see a pair of fiery eyes turned upon him. At the same instant there fell upon his horrified ears the low, angry and intense growl that could only proceed from a grizzly bear.

CHAPTER III.

KANSAS KATE ON THE TRAIL.

"INJUNS!"

As the cry rung out upon the night air, a greasy, leather-clad hunter suddenly shot out of the bushes that lined a tiny glade far away among the forests of the North-west, and by a well-directed jump landed in the midst of a camp-fire which had been blazing merrily the while, with a total disregard for the danger it might invite.

Two persons had been seated near this merry fire, who, as they have somewhat to do with our story, deserve more than passing notice.

The one bending beside the flames, and engaged in watching some culinary operation when this sudden and unprovoked assault was made upon the fire by the stranger, was a negro, whose wool was snow white and prone to stand on end when occasion presented itself.

That he was "chief cook and bottle-washer" of the establishment was made apparent from the fact of his carrying a wire hoop over his shoulder, to which could be fastened the various tin utensils for culinary purposes that strewed the ground in his immediate vicinity, and upon which he cast an occasional fatherly glance as though they were exceedingly dear to his heart.

The second person in the "greenhorn camp" was a young woman—a girl in fact, for she could not have been over twenty years of age. Her hair was black as midnight, as were also her eyes. In a belt that girded her small waist rested two small revolvers and a sheathed dagger.

Strange enough it might seem for this ill-mated couple to be roaming the country of the fierce Blackfeet, but, one glance into the brown face of the girl, would inform the curious observer that she was a desperate customer to deal with, brave as any man, and perhaps quite as reckless of danger.

When this stranger trapper landed in the midst of the fire, and began to distribute the blazing brands in every direction with the most charming carelessness where they went, the effect was magical upon these two wanderers.

The negro uttered a half-muffled howl of genuine terror, and threw himself over backward among his beloved pots and pans, where, an instant later, he was squirming around trying to get rid of a cinder that had made its way down his back and feel if his woolly scalp was still safe on his head, at one and the same time.

Before the greasy trapper had quite completed his self-imposed task of demolishing the fire, he felt a hand laid upon his arm, and looked up to see quite a thrilling spectacle.

There was not very much light left, but quite sufficient to make out the female form before him in outline, and distinguish the little revolver that was held so close to his nose that a ranger like himself ought to have been able to have smelled the gunpowder.

"Now, Sir Trapper or Renegade, whichever you may chance to be, you have succeeded in demolishing our poor little fire, but, what if I should take a notion to demolish you? I could send you to kingdom-come with the pressure of a finger. Give a speedy account of yourself sir! How dare you attempt to frighten two innocent people like we two; how dare you?"

The voice was full of passion, and what with the words she uttered, the threatening revolver and other things combined, it was no wonder that the greasy trapper came to an abrupt pause in his hurried proceedings and stood there as if petrified, with mouth and eyes open to their fullest extent.

"Trowsers an' tomcats! Be it a woman or a man in disguise?" he managed to ejaculate.

"I shall not ask you again. Where are your Indians? Show the beathen up speedily or say your prayers, for Kansas Kate means business."

The sharp, clear words of the girl cut the air like a knife. Even the darky, demoralized as he had been, ceased endeavoring to stand on his head and listened intently.

"Kansas Kate! Soup-bone an' sourkraut, do my ears deceive me? Don't ye know me, gal, me, the great Colorado rooster what has crowded in every Injun village from the Brazos to the frozen regions—me, what nussed ye, ter speak paregorically—me, the tearer an' simoon o' the prairie?"

"Know you? Bless my soul, Toby, if here isn't our old friend Roaring Ralph Rockwood! Well, you spoke up in good time, for I had my finger on the trigger, and as it was yourself taught me how to use the weapon, the result would surely have been a disastrous one. I am glad to see you, old friend, more than glad under the circumstances, for you will probably be able to supply me with the information I want. Toby, get up, you black rascal, and come here."

This border lass was a marvel, for, although unaccustomed to scenes of danger, she seemed unacquainted with the word fear. Her bold black eyes flashed like liquid lightnings, and the little brown hand could, when occasion demanded it, hold a revolver or dagger with the best of them.

The old negro came forward muttering excuses for the accident that had befallen him, but this was no time for conversation.

"Come, follow me! Snakes and snails, but the reds are thick az peas round hyar, an' if we git out o' the scrape widout runnin' inter some o' em er the pesky half breeds we'll be lucky. Ther' crawlin' through the bushes ahint the knoll yonder an' I reckon they'll hurry up when they find the fire put out. Ready for the march?"

Danger threatened on all sides, but if human nature could effect anything for these two strangers in the north-west woods, the guide that had been raised up for them would do so. His name was a power in itself, for Roaring Ralph was known as the most daring trapper and reckles fighter along the whole border.

The three of them glided in among the dense shadows, with the ranger in front and the darky bringing up the rear. The old cook was shivering so from imagining that every bush was a bloody Indian, with eyes like those of a fiend from the lower regions, that his tin pans, which he would as soon have thought of losing as his woolly scalp, kept up a continual clatter.

Slight though this noise was, none knew better than the old Colorado ranger that it would eventually lead to their detection if persisted in, so he felt it to be his duty to retire to the rear for a minute, seize the woolly-pated sinner by the throat, and, holding a glittering knife before his eyes, threaten to "slit his weasand" if he kept up the racket.

This sufficed to quiet the darky, but if he had not feared instant death he would have sunk to the ground in deadly horror when a yell from dusky throats in their rear announced that the Blackfeet had reached the empty camp.

Roaring Ralph led the way like a gaunt specter, with the others following close in his rear.

All at once the ranger dropped his rifle, and gave a leap forward that could only be compared with that of the springbok. The others heard confused and yet almost noiseless scuffling among the leaves for a dozen seconds, and then their guide made his appearance again, breathing hard and replacing his long knife in his belt.

"I fixed him; come on," he said, tersely, picking up his rifle again.

The girl, dashing as she had already proved herself to be, could but shiver at the coolness exhibited by the old ranger, for he could not have been more unconcerned had his victim been a coyote or prairie wolf.

However, she placed implicit confidence in him, and followed mutely in his footsteps, while the negro brought up the rear.

The forest was black, for the trees grew thickly together, and the moon had not yet risen in the eastern heavens. Now and then, as some place more open was passed, they could catch a good look at the star-gemmed arch above, against which the branches of the trees were outlined in bold relief.

Autumn was already far advanced, and the coolness of the night breeze told of approaching winter, but the leaves had as yet only partially fallen from the trees, which still presented an appearance far from bare, though occasionally an exception to this rule would be met with.

The course of the fugitives was toward the

north-west, for in this direction Roaring Ralph knew temporary safety was to be found, as the trapper brigade had their hidden camp among the fastnesses of the wilderness beyond this belt of rich forest land.

After that yell from the rear that told of chagrin on the part of the red-men, silence reigned supreme, save when some wolf's mournful howl, the hoot of a lonely owl, or perhaps the distant scream of a roving panther rang out.

Before they had gone much over a mile the ranger came to a halt.

"Hark!" he said. From beyond there came sounds that were to the inexperienced ears of Kanzas Kate and Black Toby but the voices of the night. Roaring Ralph knew better. They proceeded from dusky throats.

"Dust my Sunday breeches!" growled the trapper, "if they ain't circumvented us, somehow. Yas, fiddles an' fryin' pans, if them ain't counterfeit wolf-howl then ye kin cook me for a pancake. What ter do now would puzzle Alexander the Great."

He seemed to think for a moment or two, and then gave an ejaculation of satisfaction.

"Crawlers an' catamounts! yes, that's jest the ticket! We kin be as happy thar as three clams at high tide—ellers pervidin' ther pesky reds ain't found out ther hole since last season."

Once more he led the way, turning abruptly to the left. The mysterious signals seemed to sound on all sides of them, but grim Ralph Rockwood led them along, looking like a shadowy specter in the gloom of the dingy forest atmosphere.

He carried his rifle at a trail, and bent forward until his body seemed half doubled up. His keen eyes wandered incessantly from side to side, seeking danger and piercing the forest.

Eventually they came to the foothills, and as he ascertained his whereabouts Roaring Ralph chuckled to himself, while glancing back over their route.

"Fortune favors us so far, kimrades. We air close ter my retreat; an' just in time, too, for, may I be chawed up by an alligator if thar ain't ther old leddy a-waltzin' up over yender," and the ranger with his rifle indicated the eastern sky where the upper rim of the moon's disk could be seen.

He lost no more time but at once proceeded to show them to his retreat, which was nothing more or less than a cavern in the hillside.

The entrance seemed to be well hidden by creeping vines, and once they were within, Roaring Ralph led them back some distance, turning corners and eventually telling them to halt.

A light was struck, and from a hole in the wall Roaring Ralph produced a torch which he ignited and thrust into the crack from whence he had taken it.

The torch showed them the peculiar construction of the cavern. The rocks in places must have been composed partly of limestone, for stalactites hung from the roof. In others the walls glittered like so many diamonds, and Kansas Kate clapped her hands in glee, while Roaring Ralph smiled grimly.

"Yas, it's rayther a high-toned place. I used ter live hyar fur a spell, onc't; quite a story connected wid it. I war afraid some o' the reds might hev found out my new lodgin'-place since last season, an' then we'd have run inter a nice nest. Set down both o' ye, an' make yerselves ter home. Thar's a rough seat in ther shape o' a log, Kate. Now thet we're probably safe from the reds, I want ter know what ye're doin' up hyar. Ye know I'm yer sworn friend an' ready ter be yer champion."

"Then I will tell you. Ralph Rockwood, I am here for vengeance!"

She leaned forward and uttered these words in a low but thrilling tone. Her black eyes flashed so venomously that somehow the ranger shivered in spite of himself.

"Heaven help the feller ye are arter, Miss Kate. I never had a woman on my trail but once an' then I tell ye I shivered in my boots until the mistake was explained. Now tell me all."

"It is not a pleasant story, Ralph, but it has burned to my heart. You know that somehow my sister Mabel is connected with it. She is dead!"

The ranger uttered an exclamation.

"Yes," continued the girl, and there was a sad strain in her voice, "Mabel must be dead. When he basely deserted her she fled out upon the prairie and perished in the terrible cold though we never found her body. If ever a man deserved death by the torture of the inquisition that devil in human shape does, and

when Kansas Kate lays hands on him he will be ready to curse the hour he was born."

"Crawlers an' catamounts! I'm wid ye, ga'. We won't leave hide nor hair on him. Bar-claws and buffler-hoofs! tell me who he air an' I'll demolish him. It's me that sez it, Roaring Ralph Rockwood, you bet."

"His name is Harry Hastings, and I understand up here among the trappers he is known as Hickory Harry!"

The ranger fell back aghast at this astounding intelligence, and while his lips moved he uttered hardly above a whisper that weird expression:

"Dust my Sunday breeches!"

CHAPTER IV.

"INJUN SIGN."

The trapper brigade to which Hickory Harry belonged had its head-quarters in a very peculiar place which was as secure as it was difficult to reach.

Where the foothills arose to their greatest height before closing in upon the mountains beyond, a great cliff arose, its top being inaccessible as far as was known.

Some twenty yards from the base there was a division, in that the remainder of the cliff up to its top was further back.

From this point a rope ladder depended, flapping idly against the rock. This was the only means of gaining the broad ledge, and when at night it was drawn up, all communication was cut off from the ground below.

From the point where the rope ladder was secured, a splendid view could be obtained of the prairie land stretching toward the north-east, the rough, heavily-wooded lands of the south-east, and also the range of foothills dwindling down in the distance until they were lost in the hazy atmosphere. The mountains were invisible from this point being behind the ragged-faced cliff.

It was afternoon.

The sun was no longer in sight, but far out upon the prairie his golden light could be seen. As yet fall had not gone, but a certain influence in the atmosphere told these shrewd weather-prophets that perhaps before another week the snow would be upon them and their winter's sport begun.

Two men ascended the rope ladder with the skill of practiced gymnasts, or else the recklessness of dare-devilism. Upon reaching the top, they took a casual look around them, glancing along the horizon and then at the rough land so heavily wooded.

"No reds yet," muttered one.

"It will come soon enuff. We've only b'en here a week, an' they hain't had a chance yet, but you mark my words, Missouri, there's going to be the very devil to pay in these regions, this season. Now don't ask me why I say it, for I can't tell, but I seem to feel it in my bones that we're in for the tallest fighting ever placed on record. If we ever reach Brown's Hole alive, in the spring, you'll be ready to swear by Old Cinnamon as a prophet. Come, let's go on. The boys will be glad to see the fust pelt."

The two men walked along the broad ledge for perhaps ten yards and then it led them to quite a little valley to which there was no known entrance except by means of the rope ladder. Here the camp of the daring trappers was pitched.

They were few in number considering that they had this season plunged into the very heart of the Blackfoot country, and that their mortal foes, the Hudson Bay half-breeds, had swarmed to this neighborhood on the previous season, being hand and glove with the Indians, most of whom were hostile to those whose fortunes we are to follow.

In all, they numbered thirty-three men, but their reputation made them equal to twice that number of less noted trappers.

There was not a man among them who was unknown along the border, and some bore the most famous names of the time. Their rifles were deadly and their hearts devoid of fear. So long, then, as their minds were capable of meeting cunning with cunning, and their stock of ammunition held out, these men had nothing to be alarmed at.

When Old Cinnamon held up the first pelt, there were many queries in regard to it.

The trappers had only set a few of their traps as they were waiting to feel the pulse of their position, so to speak, and for cold weather to set in.

Presently an old trapper, catching the eyes of the two new-comers, beckoned them to him, and leaving the men to gather around the beaver pelt, Missouri and his companion joined him

The partisan or leader of the brigade was a veteran hunter and ranger. For several seasons Ben Rawson had led the brigade into the trapping regions and returned with a store of goods that pleased his employers well, and there was hardly anything that they would not do for him.

When he had drawn the two men near him, the partisan spoke.

"Have you seen any ugly sign, boys, down in the rough lands?"

"Nary sign," replied Old Cinnamon, who wore a necklace of bears' claws, from which perhaps his queer name was derived.

"Less ye mean beaver sign, captain, an' we've seen hosts o' thet. This here's the tarnel-est, richest region I ever war in, an' ef we hev half a chance this season, we'll lay in a stock o' pelts that'll make the agent's eyes pop out o' his head," interpolated Missouri.

"That's positive, I know, boys, but in all my trappin' experience I've found out that the thicker the beaver, the more reds you run across, and, somehow, I seem to feel we are going to have the roughest winter ever known. There will be exciting times in this region before long. A dozen things have pointed to this fact, and already the danger is threatening. Buffalo Rube has made a discovery."

"Just what I war tellin' the boyee here, not five minutes back. I kin feel it in my bones, captain. Now tell us about Rube," and Old Cinnamon prepared to listen.

"Oh, that isn't much, but you know they say straws show the way the wind blows. Rube is as furious as a wildcat because one of his traps caught the first fox and a black one at that he swears, but it was stolen. He found the hair on the jaws, and moccasin-tracks beside the trap."

"Toed in?" queried Cinnamon.

"Toed in," replied the partisan.

"Injun sign, sure," declared Missouri.

"Less some o' them cussed half-breeds hev been ther. They kin walk like a red-skin, or a turkey, or a goose even, fur that matter. Put some whisky inter one o' 'em, an' I sw'ar if ye kin tell what critter under heaven made the trail," growled Cinnamon.

"Whar is Buffalo Rube?" queried Missouri, running his eye over the group of leather-clad men gathered around the beaver-pelt and the fire.

"He's gone off again. He was in a big rage, and swore he was going to sit by that trap till doomsday but that he'd pepper the wretch who had robbed him. You both know Rube and his temper. He carried his Indian bow with him, too, for some strategic movement."

At this moment, as the three men separated and walked toward the others, a young girl came out of a lodge that had been erected against the side of the cliff, and, looking around upon the men, seemed disappointed to find some one absent. Her face lighted up, somewhat, at sight of the partisan, as if glad to see him, but it was plainly evident there was another in her thoughts.

The lodge was formed partly of canvas and also of branches. It was built against the face of the great cliff, which, just at this point, seemed to bend in considerably, proving no mean shelter in itself. This was wholly the property of the young girl and her adopted father. The interior was divided into two distinct rooms, and mortal eyes never saw that of the young girl after it was built, for the trappers were as honest and chivalrous as the day was long, and just as ready to risk life and limb for the Song Bird of their camp as to eat.

The young girl came up to the old trapper, whose face lost its troubled look at sight of her. She had a pleasant word for every man in camp and they idolized the very ground she trod on.

"Where is Harry, father?" she asked, the rosy color appearing in her cheeks at the question.

"He has not come in yet, my child, for you know his scout was to be a long one and he told us not to expect him for some time after night-fall. Never fear; he is fully able to take care of himself."

A keen observer might have observed a slight shadow flit across the countenance of the old partisan as he spoke, and yet it would have apparently been difficult to understand it, as he had always loved Hickory Harry like a son. Was a presentiment of coming evil forming in his mind? Did he know aught of Kansas Kate's coming visit? Of late it had been noticed that he was a trifle cool toward the young trapper, though there were times when he threw this feeling off and entered into the old relations with him, as if ashamed of his suspicions.

The young girl seemed satisfied with her

adopted father's reply, for she turned once more and made her way toward the lodge.

In front of it one of the trappers was building a small fire, at which the young girl was to cook supper. He was a young man, and the evident glances of admiration which he cast at the prairie belle might have told any one that his feeling for her was something warmer than that of his comrades.

Buckskin Bob was something of a gentleman; that is, he had received an education at some college in the East, but he was one of the most restless and reckless among the trappers. There was hardly anything that he would not venture to undertake, and while his bravery inspired a certain amount of respect, there was something about the young man that had always been a source of uneasiness to her. Perhaps it was the bold admiration that flashed from his eyes.

At any rate she half feared Buckskin Bob, though ashamed to let her thoughts be known, as his comrades looked upon him as the most devoted of their number.

While the young girl was engaged with supper, the afternoon changed to twilight, which, in these northern countries is of long duration.

The ladder had been drawn up for additional safety, when, just at dark, the signal came from below that informed the trappers one of their comrades—or, at any rate, some person who knew their call—was waiting for a means to reach the camp.

Two of them immediately went out to cast the rope ladder down.

Soon after, the sound of voices in conversation reached the camp. The young girl started as she heard one of them, and stood in a listening attitude, her eyes bent upon the spot where the men would make their appearance.

There were four of them, as two had ascended the rope ladder instead of one. The men, in their first momentary glance thought of course it must be their two missing comrades, but, when her eyes first fell upon the man whose voice she had taken for her lover's, Birdie Rawson's countenance fell, for she knew her mistake.

He was about Harry's size, but dressed differently. A broad rimmed hat completely shaded his face, and from his singular habit of wearing this at all times, some of the men might have been disposed to question his character from the beginning only that he came in company with a man whom they knew to be of unquestioned integrity, for Blue Bill had been commissioned to bring the other to the camp.

Their feelings toward the stranger underwent a transformation when they learned that he was Agent Hastings, the man lately invested with power by the company, and whose reputation as a fire-eater had preceded him. Still curious eyes followed him as he entered into conversation with the partisan, who invited him to his own fire.

The night wore on and the absent ones failed to return.

CHAPTER V.

THE SHAGGY MONSTER.

WHEN Hickory Harry felt his hand touch the hide of the grizzly, he could not repress the shiver that ran through his frame.

Bold to a fault, there was something in his present situation that sent a chill through him. A grizzly above, savage foes just below, and his only foothold a narrow ledge from which he might fall at any moment, and be dashed to pieces, for he was a great distance above the rock-strewn stream that rushed through the canyon, full sixty feet, so that his chances of escaping with life and sound limbs in the event of a fall, would be exceedingly slim.

At such a moment as this, the thoughts rush through the brain with lightning-like rapidity. He knew that the bear would be the one to attack him, for the animal had been disturbed by the loud voices of the ascending half-breeds.

Involuntarily he had started back, and thus escaped the wicked blow which the monster aimed at him with one of his paws. Seeing that the object of its aroused fury was still upon the ledge, the grizzly prepared to descend after him.

This was an act of some nicety, even to the cautious brute, for the shaggy monster seemed to realize that a slip would be a fatal thing; hence, the young trapper was given so many seconds in which to study his method of escape.

He uttered a sudden low cry that was full of joy and satisfaction, for an idea had flashed into his head that promised him relief. Not a second did he lose in putting it into operation.

The half-breeds were close upon him, but at

that point his form would not be outlined against the heavens, and he might perhaps make his plan succeed, after all.

Some ten feet back of where he had come up on the grizzly he had noticed, or rather felt, a split in the rock, large enough to stow himself away, and at the time had wondered whether he could not, by some possibility, make use of the cleft, never dreaming that before another couple of minutes had gone by he would be threatened with a terrible danger in front that would make this asylum a necessity for his safety.

To think, when in such a desperate situation, was, with a man of his quickness, only to act. No sooner had the idea flashed into his brain than he set to work putting it into execution.

There was danger involved in the undertaking; for, when he made such haste, there was not a little chance of his slipping, and that could, under the circumstances, mean but one thing—death.

Fortunately for the trapper, the grizzly experienced some little difficulty in coming down from his elevated place of espionage to the ledge, and this gave him a minute's time; also, none the less fortunate was the fact that the half-breeds chanced to reach a rough place just then, which required all of their attention, so that they could not waste their time in star-gazing or listening for signs from the man upon whose heels they were so hotly and closely following.

A minute of time!

Only sixty short seconds, but their passage created quite a change in the condition of affairs on the ledge.

Hickory Harry had gained the cleft, and crowded himself into it; the grizzly had come down from his elevated perch, and after moving forward, stopped in amazement at not finding his expected prey, and began sniffing the air; while the pursuing half-breeds, having surmounted their difficulties, began lastening along the ledge again.

The trapper had found some difficulty in squeezing himself into the crevice, but knowing what a fate awaited him if he once fell in to the power of either of the foes threatening him, he persevered, and at last passed the portal.

Once this was done he found it easier, for the crevice widened a little. When he reached the end he was a yard or more from the entrance. There he crouched down, waiting the opening, for he seemed to be gifted, just then, with the keen eyes of the wildcat or lynx.

He still possessed the blade of the Canadian whom he had given his death-blow in the rushing river. This would be a poor weapon against the big beast, but there was some satisfaction in the thought that neither by hook nor crook could the grizzly enter his retreat, though he might keep him a prisoner there until death in any shape would be preferable to the torture of living.

In the meantime there was quite a stirring scene preparing outside.

The leading half-breed had come to a halt, and whispered back the intelligence that the hunted man, being unable to flee further, had turned at bay, and was awaiting their coming, so a companion scrambled up alongside, which feat could be accomplished in this place, for the ledge was wider than below.

Sure enough, a pair of eyes glared at them from the darkness beyond.

Trappers though they were, these half-breeds in their excitement overlooked the fact that the piercing, glaring eyes were too far apart to be a man's and could only take it for granted that this was their foe.

Both of them raised their weapons, and, after aiming where they thought the heart of a man ought to be situated, pulled the trigger.

The double report rung out upon the clear night air, sounding doubly loud because of the narrow confines of the canyon. It was almost instantaneously followed by a roar of rage and pain from the huge grizzly that seemed to make the very air tremble.

No need of words to tell the astounded half-breeds what sort of an ugly customer they had unwittingly waked up.

It was not the first grizzly they had run upon in their lives, but there was something so terrible in the situation they were in that the two foremost men trembled as if suddenly seized with the ague.

Retreat with them seemed impossible, and yet they made a quick effort to slide back the way they had come.

Vain hope!

The huge monster sped forward, urged by the double incentive of rage and pain. Perhaps those two doomed wretches found time in that terrible moment of fear, to wonder where their

intended prey had gone to in order to escape the vengeance of the grizzly, but, if so, the thought was compelled to give way instantly to one of personal safety, for they had not even a second to lose.

By instinct, one man drew a pistol and the other a knife, as if hoping to stay the terrible rush of the grizzly by these puny weapons, and they had no sooner gotten them in readiness than, with another of his tremendous roars, that seemed to shake the very rocks themselves, the fierce animal was upon the half-breeds.

A pistol cracked.

The unlucky marksman might as well have fired his bullet into the solid wall for all the good it did his cause.

Hickory Harry heard the rush, the second shot, and then a cry of horror as the man with the pistol received a fearful blow from the heavy paw of the brute, that sent him whirling down to the rocky bed of the roaring river, fully sixty feet below.

From the continued sounds that reached his ears, the trapper knew that the other half-breed was engaged in a deadly hand to hand contest with the monster. That this was not an engagement of his own seeking one could very well understand, but that did not alter the case any.

It was easy to tell that the man was getting the worst of the battle, for his curses had a piteous ring in them that told of alarm and pain.

This did not last long.

There was another bubbling cry not unlike the first one, and the man with the knife went plunging down into the terrible depths, just as his comrade had done but a minute previously.

During this time his comrades had made their escape by clambering down the ledge with all possible haste, fully expecting at every instant to see the terrible grizzly rushing down upon them, his eyes afire and his bloody mouth gaping to receive them.

When Hickory Harry realized that the half-breeds had been defeated, he could not help feeling something like satisfaction.

His way was not yet clear as he soon realized, for the grizzly did not follow the remainder of his enemies down the ledge, as Harry had both expected and hoped he would.

The trapper was about to make his way to the opening and see if the coast was clear, so that he could escape, when his quick ear caught the sound of snuffing, and a half choked snort.

As the roaring river below made such noise, it was not easy to make certain, but surely the sound had come from the ledge without, and this would seem to indicate that the terrible grizzly was still on guard.

Ha! again the snort reached his ears.

This time there could be no mistake, for presently he saw a pair of fierce red eyes glaring upon him.

Then he could hear a scraping, clawing noise, as though Bruin was reaching in as far as he could, and clawing the sides of the little niche in the hope and expectation of reaching him.

Finding this a fruitless endeavor, after many trials, the old grizzly desisted, but he squatted down at the opening, as much as to say that he intended fighting it out on that line if it took him all winter.

Hickory Harry was in a sad predicament.

If ever a trapper was neatly trapped he found himself in that situation just then, and, what seemed the worst part of it, was the fact that, apparently, there was no means of escape.

He was not the man to give in as long as his brain remained capable of planning, and as he raised his eyes, a sadder idea flashed into his mind.

The crevice extended upward.

He was within fifteen feet of the bank's top and it was very probable that the crack reached that far.

If this were indeed so, what was to hinder his working his way up gradually until he gained the solid ground above? Nothing that he knew of; so, filled with a new enthusiasm and a strength born of exultation, Hickory Harry set about putting his plan into operation.

He found that the crevice was just wide enough for him to get a good purchase by extending his arms and legs, being about three feet from wall to wall.

It was fortunate for the trapper that his feet were clad in moccasins, for had he possessed boots, it would have been necessary to take them off.

As the sides of the crevice were rough, and Hickory Harry an exceedingly nimble man, it was easy work for him to make his way upward after once starting.

Several times he found the task a little diffi-

cult, for in places there were cavities in the walls, which, although not much in themselves, proved dangerous for the success of his undertaking, for a slip just then would have brought on a disaster the extent of which he could guess at but did not choose to try.

Slowly then the trapper neared the top of the wall. As all of his attention was needed in order to prevent himself making a slip, he knew that it would be unnecessary to look up. He could tell that he was nearing the surface, for the light of the moon now reached the space just above him.

He seemed to breath easier when drawing in the air of freedom. One more gallant effort; he seized upon a projecting rock, drew himself up, and then crawled out of the crevice, panting with the exertion, to find himself face to face with a six-foot, leather-clad trapper, who could only be one of his mortal foes, the half-breeds!

CHAPTER VI.

ROARING RALPH.

It was little wonder that the old Colorado ranger was so thunderstruck with the news vouchsafed by Kansas Kate that he could only whisper his favorite ejaculation, that meant amazement to him.

At various times for the last few years he had been in company with Hickory Harry, knew him as well as one trapper usually knows another, and had looked upon him as the best and most honorable fellow the sun ever shone upon.

To receive the announcement, point-blank from the lips of a girl who he knew would not condescend to lie to save her life, that this dashing young trapper, the pet of the brigade, had proven the most dastardly of scoundrels in relation to her sister, and that she was on his trail intent upon a terrible revenge, was quite enough to upset the trapper's equanimity.

"Grunters an' grub-grinders, air ye dead sartin Kate?" he ejaculated, when he had in part recovered his breath.

"As certain as that I live. You know this Hickory Harry then. Listen, and if my description tallies, *he is the man.*"

The girl's determined tone, told better than any words could have done, what she would do when first her eyes rested upon the man she sought. His denials of guilt would be laughed to scorn, and the dainty revolver in her belt would speedily avenge her lost sister.

"His hair is neither black nor brown but between the two shades. Eyes the darkest shade of blue. When I saw him last he wore a brown mustache. In bight he is of the medium, say an inch shorter than you. Now, what say you, Roaring Ralph?"

"Kansas Kate, ye hev described Hickory Harry ter a dot. Bullets an' bayonets! I hate ter b'lieve it o' the boyee, but may I be chawed up by an alligator, an' roasted on ther end o' a two-pronged pitchfork if the case don't look mighty bad. Do ye know, I've seen him when he war alone, look all-fired sad like as if he'd lost his best friend, and I've seen ter myself a dozen times that the boyee hed a secret o' some kind on his mind. Bu'st my moceasins but it's too bad, too bad," and Roaring Ralph's mournful tone fully corroborated his sorrowful words.

During this conversation the aged negro had remained seated upon a rock, busily engaged in looking over his stock of tin cans, handling them gently, and reverently smoothing out any dents that he found, as well as the circumstances would allow.

He paid no attention to what they were saying, but continued his investigations among his culinary articles.

Suddenly he happened to glance up, and a howl broke from his lips that might have raised the dead, had any of those interesting folks been in the immediate neighborhood. Roaring Ralph looked up to see the aged negro's trembling finger pointing into the recesses of the cavern while he trembled as with the ague.

"Looky dar, massa, dey's a ghost or a Injun an' dey gobble up pore Toby! Glory halleluyah, I'se a gone niggah, shuah," and as the aged darky attempted to make a backward movement, it was attended with disastrous consequences that he had not bargained for.

It was not a very difficult matter for his elephantine feet to catch upon some obstruction, and the result was he fell back upon the rock, and from thence over on to the tin cans, amid a tremendous racket that could never be described.

Nor was this the worst of the matter.

When he careened over the rock upon which he had previously been seated, Toby's heels very naturally became elevated, and some fate, friendly or otherwise, must have directed them toward the torch, which, as will be remembered,

Roaring Ralph had thrust into a crack in the wall.

The result was disastrous.

Negro, torch, tin cans and all came down in a confused heap. For the space of some ten seconds it was nip and tuck as to which should conquer, Toby or the torch. Finally the energetic heels of the old darky decided the matter, and the heaviest possible gloom settled upon the cavern and its occupants.

Roaring Ralph had turned when he saw the negro pointing, and just in time to catch a glimpse of a form beyond, before the torch went out.

Indian or white he could not positively say, for unfortunate Toby commenced his systematic tactics upon the torch just then, and darkness followed.

The trapper was a resolute man.

These two had been placed in his hands almost miraculously, and it was his intention to see them safe in the camp of the brigade, if possible.

Fearing an attack, his first act was to grasp his trusty rifle, and dropping upon one knee, held it ready for instant use, though in such Cimmerian gloom it would not be able to do its duty well.

When old Toby, having found that he was not yet burned to cinders, or scalped by the savages, condescended to lie quiet, the scout listened intently for any suspicious sounds, but none came to his ear. Whoever was beyond, remained silent.

There was something about this that worried the Colorado ranger, more than words could tell.

He felt around the negro's heels about as carefully as one would the heels of a mule, and having laid hands on the extinguished torch, gave it to Kansas Kate with the whispered instruction to ignite it, at the same time threatening poor Toby with instant annihilation if he so much as winked an eye.

Matches were something unknown in those regions, but every one carried tinder with their flint and steel, and in about two minutes Kansas Kate had deftly managed to light the torch again, which she boldly held above her head while the trapper peered into the opposing gloom, holding his rifle ready for immediate action, should he discover a painted Blackfoot there.

This preparation for active warfare was all in vain, however, as nothing met the eyes of the ranger but the deep gloom beyond the line of light.

He was ready to swear he had seen a man standing there, but now this person had vanished.

Roaring Ralph was puzzled.

After a minute's thought he arose to his feet, and requested Kansas Kate to accompany him forward with the light. Toby, being too much alarmed to remain alone, after they had gone a little distance, scrambled to his feet and gathering his beloved cans together, made haste to follow.

When they had reached the spot where the human figure had stood, according to the calculation of the ranger, he bent down and examined the rocky floor very carefully. His acute eyes readily detected signs that would have been in visible to most persons, and told him his eyes had not been at fault.

"Some critter's been here, Kate, and has quietly vamosed the ranch. Shuffers an' shootin'-irons, who'd a' thought that war a back door to my secret place, an' thet known ter some other critter, probably an Injun? We must git outen here."

There was something in the trapper's way of pronouncing this last sentence, that told he meant every word of it. The secret of the cavern was known to some one else, that was positive, and the better plan would be for them to get out at as speedily as possible.

True, danger lurked around them, for the Blackfeet, having been cheated at the camp, were evidently still vigorously searching for them, but the Colorado ranger was one of those men who could not bear to be caught in a trap. Give him an open field where retreat was possible if necessary, and maneuvering could be brought into play, and he did not fear the whole Blackfoot nation, but in this place, where an enemy could hide in the dark and pop a man over as he held a torch, it was too much for him.

To the others his decision was given, and the old negro received it with a groan. As for Kansas Kate, i was all the same to her. There was danger everywhere, but she had implicit faith in the greasy trapper, and besides, this border girl was braver than most men of the frontier.

Having concluded upon this move, the strange trio again took up their march, leaving the cavern in the same way they had entered it.

They were all unconscious of the fact that they were followed, and yet, once or twice Roaring Ralph turned in a troubled way, and tried to pierce the darkness in their rear.

He was unable to see the two forms that kept just beyond the edge of the light. One of these was a hunter, the other a female clad in buckskin, with her face almost wholly hidden from view. Who this mysterious pair were, and what their mission in the far North-west, we will discover as our narrative progresses.

When Roaring Ralph and his friends drew near the opening, the cautious ranger extinguished the torch, and then moved on again.

What sort of danger lurked behind him he could not say. The figure had been within the range of his vision for so brief a time that he was not ready to swear positively whether it was red, white or black in color, though he had his suspicions.

For all he knew it might have been the ghost of some poor, unfortunate trapper who had been waylaid by the fierce red-men, and crept into the cavern to die.

Roaring Ralph had seen many strange things in his time, and was something of a believer in specters, though he feared neither man, beast or devil. He could not repress a shudder, however, at the thought of a struggle in the darkness with a spirit from the grave.

Hence he breathed easier when once more the stars shone over his head. The moon was some little distance above the horizon, and wheeling upward on her circuit.

Roaring Ralph knew that the only thing left for him was to strike boldly for the trappers' camp. There was certainly a terrible risk in the move, but it was all that he could do, and no matter what was done, danger would still hover around them. He had often found that the best way to avoid danger was to plunge right into it. If a man escaped from prison, they would not think of such a thing as his going back there again to hide. Roaring Ralph believed in striking right through the fire and not around it.

Still he was at times a man of extreme caution and cunning. Knowing that the woods were full of Blackfeet, and probably Hudson Bay half-breeds, he kept both eyes and ears on the alert for signs.

Now and then they could hear signals in the great forest, but these generally appeared to be quite a distance away. So for some twenty minutes the march was continued, and the ranger had hopes that they would altogether elude their enemies.

In the course of their forward movement they came to a log that spanned a creek in a small canyon some twenty feet deep, through which ran a stream. Roaring Ralph had crossed this before and he boldly strode upon it, holding his rifle so that Kansas Kate could steady herself with the stock. In the center of the quivering log bridge he found himself in the unpleasant situation of staring into the face of a Blackfoot brave who had been advancing from the opposite side.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MOCK WOLF.

BEHIND a thicket of bushes there crouched an old gray-haired trapper. His leather hunting-shirt and breeches were much the worse for wear, being covered with a bountiful supply of dirt that had gradually accumulated from many a camp-fire.

Buffalo Rube was a queer genius.

He was well known as the most reckless and at the same time fiery-tempered ranger along the border, though of course Roaring Ralph could sometimes show him something in the first line when the occasion presented itself; but let Rube get angry and he would just as soon walk into a Blackfoot village and take the scalp of the chief, as chew venison for supper.

When, therefore, Rube made the discovery that during the preceding night one of his traps had been visited by an Indian, and a black fox stolen thereout, he was the maddest of human beings.

After returning to the camp for his Indian bow, and to inform his comrades what had become of him, he once more made his way to where the trap was situated, and in the gloaming took up his position behind the thicket, ready and anxious to see the thief again make his appearance.

The Indian had tried to hide all traces of his presence, but Buffalo Rube was too old a trapper to be deceived. He discovered everything

in a very short space of time, and drew his conclusions.

From the fact of the pelt-thief being so very careful, it was evident to the old trapper that he fully intended coming back again on the following night, and the old fellow smiled grimly as he seated himself among the bushes and waited for the moon to rise.

During his life he had seen many adventures with such light-fingered gentry, and had been known to watch every night for weeks if he thought there was any likelihood of the fellow's return, which, in the present instance he was quite sure of.

The moon at length wheeled into view above the horizon, and after convincing himself by a good view that the trap, which now held another black fox, the mate probably of the one caught the night before, had not been disturbed, he settled himself down behind his screen, and waited for the coming of the pelt-thief.

The time passed slowly.

Now and then the attention of the old trapper would be diverted by the movement of some animal. A squirrel would be frolicking in the moonlight, or perhaps a jack-rabbit sped through the open space on the way to a burrow or rendezvous. Once a deer bounded past, so close that the man behind the bushes could easily have driven an arrow to the head into his side, had he not been waiting for larger game.

A wolf came out of the bushes, and crept nearer the trap.

Buffalo Rube did not see the animal at first, for it came from the other side of the glade, where the shadows were densest, and even when he did sight it he could only see the animal's back.

He gave a start and bending forward, watched the progress of the animal, for he saw it was moving steadily closer to the trap.

At length the wolf stood over the black fox.

Buffalo Rube could hear a snarling on the part of the latter that gradually grew fainter, and a grim made itself apparent upon his bronzed features as he raised his stout bow, to the string of which he had already affixed a long arrow. He was waiting for Mr. Wolf to show himself a little better, when he intended giving him the benefit of the shaft.

After some little maneuvering the animal seemed to be satisfied, for he commenced moving away,

Suddenly there sounded a peculiar, tremulous whistle, Mr. Wolf came to a halt at just the spot where Buffalo Rube wished him to be, for the moon gave him some advantage.

There was a sharp snap as the bow-string came against the wood, but the feathered arrow had sped upon its mission.

A half muffled yell broke out upon the air, and the wolf suddenly sprung erect. The wolf-skin was thrown back, disclosing a painted Blackfoot brave, into whose body the arrow had gone.

Buffalo Rube sprung from the thicket and leaped toward the Indian, but before he reached him, the pelt-thief had fallen back to the ground, dead.

His ingenious device of approaching the trap had failed to deceive the old ranger, though it might have deceived younger men. He had evidently expected to find some one watching, or else he feared he might, which was the reason of his disguising himself.

Rube hated all Indians cordially, and he experienced no little satisfaction in seeing the death of this savage. In his mind the red-skin deserved his fate, and after he had taken the wretch's weapons, to prove what he had done, the trapper set about removing his trap from the spot.

The Indian had been in the act of carrying off the black fox when shot, and Rube now kindly volunteered to finish this duty for him, after which he set out toward the camp, intending to leave the trap in a certain ravine as he went along.

He had not gone far before the sound of voices reached his ears. Instantly he was on the alert. Ascertaining the point from whence they came, he crept forward in order to listen, for he was a born spy, and could carry on the business of one with more success than most men.

In a very short time it became evident to the trapper that those in conversation were not Indians, and presently he caught a glimpse of their forms. They were two in number, and sat upon a log. He could see that they were clad in buckskin, and from the occasional French words that dropped into their conversation, knew that they must be his deadly foes, the Canadian half-breeds.

By wriggling forward like a snake, he finally managed to get close enough to hear what they

were saying, although of course he heard only the latter portion of the conversation. Somehow, one of the voices seemed familiar to him, and he felt sure he had met the man before, though he could not say when or under what circumstances.

"Lucky for us Hastings came when he did and made his proposition. The captain seems to know him well, so I guess they have worked in harness together, before this. We're in luck this season. *Parbleu!* what with bagging this band and laying hands on the peltries they *ca-hed* last spring on Wildcat creek, it will make a man's heart jump when he gets back to the fort. By the way, what about our *expedition* there? I didn't get the full particulars."

"First of all we intend wiping out these creatures—fools I might call them. Hastings is to put them all to sleep with a drug, or do something of that sort, so that we may have a bloodless victory. *Sacre!* how I shall love to knock Buffalo Rube and Tom Grampus on the head, for I owe them one great grudge. When this work is done then we shall set out for Wildcat creek and open the *cache*. It would be a good joke for two enterprising young men such as you and I, Jaques, to precede them and spirit away the furs before their arrival. It could be done; who knows but what it may?"

"*Diabol!* who knows?" echoed the other with a hoarse laugh that grated like a file.

The old trapper, crouching so close at hand, recognized in this man, now that he had brought several things to mind, an old-time enemy, one Paul Rochet, who went by the name of Dusky Paul, and with whom he had been at war for many years.

Eagerly Buffalo Rube bent his head to catch the words that followed, but they were brief, and gave him no satisfaction. Then the two half-breeds arose and left the place, but they also left a rather hazy impression in the mind of the old ranger.

Hastings!

It seemed to him that he had heard that name before somewhere and yet—stay! Nonsense; the thought was beyond belief, and the trapper laughed at the idea as though it was a good joke. He had known Hickory Harry too long to think such a thing of him, but it came up in his mind several times later, that night, under other peculiar circumstances.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RECKLESS RANGER.

It was not in the nature of man not to be somewhat startled by such an alarming position, but when Roaring Ralph came face to face with the Blackfoot brave upon the bridge, he was more astonished than afraid.

Naturally, the first impulse of both men was to start back after this sudden and unexpected encounter.

Their eyes were glued together and seemed to be emitting sparks of fire in the earnestness of their hate.

Roaring Ralph could see the outlines of the other but dimly, but he could without much trouble tell that it was an Indian, and all of that class were his inveterate foes. On the other hand, the Blackfoot had no such positive assurance. He saw that the man who opposed his further progress on the log was white, but he had friends among the half-breeds.

It must have been instinct that told him the truth. Perhaps he caught a glimpse of the old trapper's *protegee* in the rear, and being one of the party that had tried to circumvent Kansas Kate and her black retainer, understood who these parties were.

At any rate he stood his ground.

If he was alone, this was a brave act, but the probability was, he had comrades near at hand, and felt able to cope with one trapper, a girl and an aged darky.

Roaring Ralph's only fear was that a pack of the painted hounds might be in hiding just beyond the log bridge, and that, after he had polished off this fellow, he and his friends would run straight into their arms.

He wasted very little time in thinking, but, drawing his ready blade, sprung forward upon the half-crouching Blackfoot. Evidently the other had not expected this onslaught, for he had no weapon in his hand, but for all that he made quite a desperate resistance.

The first act of the old trapper was to clasp him by the throat, and once this was accomplished he held on with the tenacity of a bulldog.

By some fortune the Indian's hand had come in contact with Roaring Ralph's knife-arm, and he maintained his hold of the wrist, well knowing that he was in a desperate situation, for should

he allow that bright weapon to do its work, the end of the duel would come in a twinkling. Realizing this he held on like grim death.

The Indian proved himself no match for Roaring Ralph either in strategy or strength. As the impetus of the ranger's assault had carried them back upon the log, the red-skin's other hand was kept busily employed to keep himself from falling, so that the white man had the greater advantage, for his iron fingers were clutching the throat of his enemy and gradually choking the life out of him.

He could feel the wretch growing weaker, but still he held on with a death-gripe that it was as yet impossible to break.

At this intensely interesting juncture the keen ears of the scout gave him to understand that some one else had stepped upon the log, from the same side from which the Indian had come, and glancing up, he saw outlined against the heavens the form of a second brave.

This worthy was not making his way out upon the log carefully. Above his head his tomahawk was raised, and his keen eyes were glued upon the two struggling foes. Evidently he was coming with the intention of burying the weapon in the brain of the white man.

Roaring Ralph realized his danger and made strenuous attempts to free his knife-arm; but the red held on to the right arm of his enemy.

As the Indian advanced, the situation became more desperate for the trapper, and presently he found that the final scene had come.

He was just contemplating taking the chances of a dive from the log into the gully below, taking the Blackfoot with him down into the stream, when a sudden tongue of flame shot across the darkness above him.

There came the ringing report of a rifle, and the menacing Blackfoot, with a half-smothered yell, went whirling down into the gloomy abyss, striking the water with a great splash.

When Roaring Ralph realized that he had been saved, a load was lifted from his heart.

"Good for Kansas Kate, dust my Sunday breeches if it ain't," he exclaimed, and then set to work in earnest with the intention of disposing of the Blackfoot brave whom he still held down upon the log.

This was not such a great task, for when the red-skin realized that his comrade was disposed of, all his strength seemed to give way; there was the sound of a deep blow, and then a second heavy splash in the stream below which for the second time engulfed a Blackfoot, as Roaring Ralph arose to his feet.

"Rattlesnakes an' roosters! if they keep on we kin fill ther ravine chock full o' ther reds," he muttered.

A few words to the others caused them to retreat to the shore from whence they had come, where a hasty consultation ensued between the greasy trapper and Kansas Kate.

They wished to cross this bridge if such a think was possible, as the gully extended for miles, and they would have to go out of their way to get over.

Still, it was dangerous, for enemies might be in hiding among the bushes beyond. Roaring Ralph speedily formed his plan of action, and communicated it to his friends. He intended crossing and finding out whether the coast was clear beyond. If all was right he would give the cry of the foolish loon, thrice, which they would understand, of course, to be the signal for them to pass over while he was guarding the other end of the log pathway.

On the other hand, if they heard any sounds that would seem to indicate that he had fallen into an ambuscade, their actions must be prompt. The negro was to push the log from its resting place, which he could easily do with a good lever, and then it would devolve upon the girl to lead her sable companion and servant along the little canyon to a point where it could be passed, after which she was to continue on in a given direction until a certain point was reached, where they were to await him.

Having thus arranged matters, Roaring Ralph left his rifle in charge of Kansas Kate, and then sprang boldly upon the log, making his way across, his knife in one hand and a pistol in the other, ready for any emergency.

The log swayed a trifle under his weight, having, perhaps, been somewhat shaken in its foundations by the violent struggle between Roaring Ralph and the Blackfoot, but he was not afraid of its falling.

When near the end he heard a sound that, in his fancy at least, seemed suspiciously like the clicking of a gun lock, and involuntarily the wary trapper crouched upon the stick. Hastily reaching the terminus, he made a leap and landed in the bushes.

As he did so a gun was discharged, and the bullet actually touched the fringe of his buckskin leggings. Evidently the hidden marksman had not expected this sudden leap, and had fired hastily.

As Roaring Ralph landed in the bushes, shadowy forms arose on all sides, and he found himself in the midst of a dozen Hudson Bay half-breeds.

When once aroused, Roaring Ralph was a perfect hurricane of a fighter, and he now proved this to the full satisfaction of several of his foes whom he silenced in various ways.

A shot from his revolver sent one fellow to the earth in a hurry. The weapon was knocked from the ranger's hand, but his knife quickly took its place, and was as speedily buried in the breast of another, who, in the wild leap he gave, wrenched the weapon from the ranger's hand and fell back into the canyon just as Toby shoved the log from its rock foundation and sent it crashing down to the depths below.

A third man old Ralph pounced upon, and rapped so heavily with his fists that the wretch sank back with a piteous cry to the earth.

It was while the rough Colorado ranger was engaged with another, whom he bit and gouged as if he was the extracted essence of seventeen wildcats, that one of the half-breeds, a redoubtable fellow by the name of Jean Bardeau, crept quickly behind him, and before the trapper was aware of his intentions had thrown himself at full length upon his back.

Roaring Ralph was agile as a panther, but this mode of tactics was beyond him. Dropping his intended fourth victim, he turned his full attention to this new foe in the rear. In vain he attempted to get at the enemy. The half-breed hung on with the tenacity of a leech; and, unable to rid himself of the burden, the ranger actually commenced running off with the fellow, but it was hardly to be supposed that the man's comrades were to remain idle and see him abducted in this most astonishing manner.

They bounded after the ranger, therefore, and coming up with him, added their weight to that of the man already upon his back. This was too much for even such a Hercules as Roaring Ralph, and he went down, still kicking, biting and gouging.

In the space of a minute, however, he was bound, and found himself a prisoner of the dusky border wolves.

CHAPTER IX.

A VOICE FROM THE AIR.

ROARING RALPH knew what mercy he might expect from the half-breeds, which was one cause of his making such a tremendous fight.

They hated him worse than poison, and now that he was in their hands nothing but death would cause them to release the trapper.

He was immediately hauled back to the vicinity where the fight had first begun, and where the log bridge had rested. The trapper could not notice the fact of its having vanished from view, and from this he argued well for his friends. They had without doubt taken the alarm, and after hurling the log into the stream below, had departed.

A hasty consultation ensued among the Hudson Bay trappers, and they were not long in coming to an understanding. Leaving two of their number in charge of the prisoner, they divided into two companies, and while one went up-stream, the other took a direction exactly the opposite.

No sooner had these men vanished from view than Roaring Ralph began thinking of escape. Though lying in an apparently dazed state, from the effects of a blow upon the head, his mental faculties were never in a more active condition.

He saw that his guards were both known to him, and presently a bright little plan came into his mind. First of all he tried his bonds, and found they were secure, but this mattered little, for the man he had shot lay within half a dozen feet of him, and his knife was still in his belt.

His first and main object then was to get the two guards away from the spot for a few minutes, and his mode of procedure was certainly effective.

These guards standing near at hand, he could not have made a movement that would have escaped their notice.

In the midst of their conversation the two men heard a faint cry.

"Hark! what was that?" exclaimed one.

"Peste! it was only the wind among yonder trees," returned the other.

His comrade caught his arm just then.

"Help! for the love of Heaven, help!"

The voice seemed to come from the air, and the two superstitious men commenced to shiver with an unaccountable fear. Again the voice came, crying for help, and uttering both of their names.

At that, one of them mustered up courage enough to answer.

"Who and where are you?" he demanded.

"Over the bank. I am Maurice Grau. Quick! for the love of mercy or I am gone," came the mysterious voice.

Maurice Grau was the name of the man whom Roaring Ralph had plunged his knife into and who had fallen over into the little canyon about the time the negro had pushed the log bridge over. The two men immediately became all excitement.

"It is our comrade, and he is in the river. We have not a second to lose," cried one, and the two bounded away as if mad, to a spot where the bank of the canyon was more sloping and would admit of a descent.

The intelligent reader can readily understand that this was all a trick of the captive ranger. Knowing the names of the three parties, and being a rude ventriloquist, he had managed to get the two men left to guard him, out of the way.

No sooner had they vanished over the brow of the bank, than he was at work. Rolling over several times he reached the defunct half-breed and quickly drew the knife from the dead man's belt, thrust it into a stump close at hand, and ran the thong that bound his wrists together so tightly, over the keen edge several times, when he found himself at liberty.

Then he severed the bonds that secured his ankles; and securing what weapons the dead man had, he crept to the edge of the bank. Upon reaching it he saw the two men busily engaged in examining the surface of the water, and occasionally calling out for Maurice Grau.

"Dust my Sunday breeches! I hope ye'll have good luck in the hunt."

At these words, the two half-breeds turned to see their late captive standing upon the bank free!

When they reached the top, he was gone, for the neighboring bushes and trees offered a cover in which any one could hide from the keenest eyes.

Roaring Ralph, upon making his escape, lost no time in heading for the point where he had promised to meet his two *protégés* in case they escaped falling into the hands of their double foes, who seemed to be thick as blackberries in burnt ground.

Eluding his foes safely, he drew near the tall sycamore on the bank of a little creek, which was the place he had spoken about.

Were the two there or had they missed the way, and gone wandering on in the forest, to become lost or eventually fall into the hands of enemies?

A slight rattle of tin told him that his two charges had arrived safely.

Another instant and with a rattle of his accoutrements, Toby had thrown himself flat upon the ground.

"Luff my hair be, good mister Injin, an' Toby be ye slave. Foah massy sakes don't skulp um, an' dar ain't nuffin he won't do for youse. Oh, glory hallelujah, I'se a gone niggah. Tell Dinah—"

The iron fingers of the trapper clutched the black throat; and when he had given the African to understand who he was and the dire consequences that would follow another such racket, he allowed him a chance to breathe.

He was warmly greeted by Kansas Kate who feared from the noise made over the canyon that her champion had been overcome and brutally murdered. What to do next was the question.

The forest was so full of Indians between this place and the trapper camp, that it would be suicidal to now attempt to reach it, therefore Ralph led off at right angles with the direction whence lay their friends.

As he led the way along, his thoughts were not over-pleasant. It was not of their own danger he was thinking, but the situation of the "boys," as he was wont to call the bronzed, leather-clad trappers, for it was evident that trouble of a serious nature was brewing for them. There could be no peace for the Old Nor'-west men until they had taught their enemies a lesson they would not be apt to forget in a hurry.

This would not be an easy matter, for these half-breeds were, one and all, good woodsmen, and as for the red men, their deviltry was too well known to mistake the meaning of their presence.

"Tar-heels an' turpentine! I see we're goin' ter hev ther heftiest season ever was, an' the boyees who come out alive at the end may be thankful."

Roaring Ralph at length led the way into a ravine that grew darker with every step. In this he intended to remain hidden until the path became more clear; but the thoughts of the trapper were suddenly put to flight by a sharp snap, and something gripped hold of his foot. He had stepped into a fox-trap.

"Dust my Sunday breeches!" he exclaimed.

"Is that you, Roaring Ralph Rockwood?" demanded a voice, and Buffalo Rube made his appearance.

CHAPTER X.

THE UNKNOWN RANGER.

HICKORY HARRY had certainly gone through enough on this night to tire out most men, but his was an indomitable spirit. When therefore, after crawling out of the crevice upon the top of the canyon bank, he found himself face to face with a tall, stalwart man, his first and only impression was that it must be an enemy, one of those who had hounded him so far.

The moon was shining, but the man's hat was drawn down over his face, and only a shadowy outline of his physiognomy could be seen. In reality, this was the same figure that, in company with the woman, had crept so stealthily out of the cavern when Roaring Ralph and his two friends had left it.

Hickory Harry crouched low upon the rock. He had no hope of avoiding the other, for he saw that his eyes were upon him.

The Unknown suddenly raised his hand and then in a low voice uttered the strange words:

"Hist! make no noise, but follow me."

Amazed, Hickory Harry could only obey; while his conductor led the way down the incline, taking advantage of the trees that soon appeared, as if anxious to shield himself and companion from hostile eyes.

There was no alarm given; and they reached the level land below without any adventure. When once there the Unknown turned. He was face to face with Hickory Harry, but had chosen his position well, for the shadow of a tree aided the broad brim of his hat in concealing his face.

Then the Unknown spoke, in a low, intense tone of voice:

"You are safe, now. Make your way to your friends and inform them of their danger as soon as possible, for I am sure these fiends mean business. There, no thanks. I know you well though you do not remember me in this garb, but I will see you again, Hickory Harry, among your friends, and there tell you that which will amaze you. First of all I have a sworn duty to perform, the work of vengeance of a woman who is near and dear to me. Go, now, and remember that you will see me again when perhaps you least expect it."

Hickory Harry would not leave until he had pressed the hand of this mysterious friend.

The grasp he received was so fierce, as if some controlled feeling had burst its bonds, that he was astonished to feel a thrilling sensation run over his whole frame, and hardly knowing what he did, he returned the clasp with one equally as strong, which seemed to affect the Unknown strangely.

Then turning, he left the spot.

Looking back, he saw the stranger still standing in the same position, with his head bowed, as though affected by some deep emotion; and as the young man looked, he saw a female form come out of the bushes and approach.

That she was no enemy to the Unknown he soon had ocular evidence, for the tall man swept her to him with one strong arm, and seemed to be telling her something in excited though extremely guarded tones.

"That is the one he spoke of, and whom he has sworn to avenge upon some person. Well, whoever he may be he has affected me strangely. Can it be he was in any way connected with that horrible tragedy that I dare not think of without shuddering? Away with such thoughts! I have sworn never to let them come into my mind again, lest they drive me mad. I can and must think of nothing but my darling, letting that mad though unintended act lie buried in the grave of the past."

Hickory Harry turned his head and walked rapidly away. He knew in which direction to go, and by a circuitous route reached the river again at a place where there was quite a good ford offered by stepping stones, on which he managed to cross the river, and once more found himself on that side where his fight with the treacherous half-breed, Black Baptiste, had occurred.

His intention was to recover possession of his beloved rifle if such a thing was possible, and with one glance around him to take in his situation he started off at a swinging pace. But his progress although rapid was extremely cautious, and it did not take him long to reach the very spot of the encounter.

The little glade was silent and deserted.

By a short search he came upon his rifle just where he had thrown it. Either his enemies had been unable to find the weapon or else had not thought of searching.

Hickory Harry now resumed his interrupted course toward the camp of his friends.

Somehow or other his thoughts would stray to the mysterious Unknown who had crossed his path, but each time he fiercely dismissed the subject as if it was connected with a past that he did not care to remember at all, much less ponder over.

Strange conduct for one whom the trappers looked upon as the soul of honor! Ah! could the old partisan chief have known of Kansas Kate, and also this secret of the past that was so shocking that even the young man himself dared not think of it, perhaps the love for Harry would have been crushed out of his heart.

The young man's course was straight for the trapper camp, and without any more adventures, he reached it in about an hour. His signal was answered by the guard, and then, as the rope ladder was lowered, he clambered up with all the agility and speed of an old Jack Tar mounting the shrouds of his vessel on a pleasant day.

The camp seemed wrapped in slumber, but upon casting his eyes around, Harry saw the partisan and a man seated beyond the fire. They had evidently been engaged in serious conversation, for no one lay near them, and their eyes were fastened strangely on Harry.

As he drew near, the young man saw that the companion of Ben Rawson was no other than Buffalo Rube. He greeted them warmly, and spoke in modest terms of his recent terrible adventure.

It did not take him long to discover that there was something wrong, for both of the trappers listened in cold silence to his story, and once he caught them exchanging a quick, significant smile.

With a vague, uneasy feeling in his heart, Hickory Harry threw himself upon the earth to sleep, not knowing that his deadliest foe was on the other side of the fire.

CHAPTER XI.

TREACHERY MOST VILE.

WHEN Roaring Ralph heard that voice from the darkness, he did not recognize it; but, knowing that the other must be a friend, he answered the question in the affirmative.

Another instant and he was grasping the hand of Buffalo Rube, who was an old friend. Many a time had they gone on the trail together, and the thrilling adventures that had befallen them on these occasions had cemented the bond between them.

In low tones they held a brief conversation, during which each learned of the other's late actions. During this interview Toby seated himself upon the ground with his precious tin cans around him.

After each had explained his presence, the Colorado ranger introduced Buffalo Rube to Kansas Kate, whom he greeted with all the grace of a Chesterfield, for, greasy old trapper though he was, and one who never saw a woman over once a year, Buffalo Rube was a natural born gallant, and could win hearts where younger and more handsome men failed.

He speedily informed Roaring Ralph that their location was too far away from the camp. If they took his advice, he could lead them to one which would be much nearer, and where they could be found better by a force of friends from the camp.

There was deviltry on foot among the allies, or else they would not be thronging the woods in such close proximity to the camp. Each of these men possessed a secret in regard to Hickory Harry, and a few trivial remarks served to make them confide in each other.

It will be remembered that Buffalo Rube could not and would not believe that Hickory Harry was meant by the half-breeds when they spoke of having a spy named Hastings in the trapper camp, who was to hand it over to them by some sort of treachery; but now he was convinced against his will that such must indeed be the case, for the story told to him by Roaring Ralph in relation to the sister of Kansas Kate was enough to destroy his faith in the young

trapper, and once this was destroyed he could readily believe anything of him.

When they left the ravine it was under the guidance of Buffalo Rube, who knew the country better than Roaring Ralph did, for the latter had not been in the vicinity for years.

The old trapper brought them along with much skill, avoiding all danger, and finally reaching the place which he considered safer than the ravine where Roaring Ralph had led his *proteges*.

It was a singular spot among the hills.

The place of refuge was in a small valley with hills surrounding it on all sides, and these were covered with heavy timber.

Buffalo Rube led them to an immense tree, a monarch of the forest, and after fumbling around for a time, revealed to their astonished eyes a cavity in the tree. It grew close against a heap of rocks that had doubtless fallen from some neighboring ledge, and in some manner the trapper kept the opening concealed.

There was room within the great trunk for all to sit down, but Buffalo Rube did not enter, for he intended going on to the trapper camp.

"Ye will be comfortable here till we come for ye. It may be to-morrow or perhaps not until the next, but I sha'n't forget ye, and Roaring Ralph will take keer o' ye. This place is pecculiar, but it has served me a good turn on several occasions; once when I was chased by Blackfeet and nearly dead for fatigue, I lost my trail in the creek beyond there, pulled myself up into the branches o' a tree, lay there till they had scooted past, and then got in here. I'm off, and I'll 'tend to that matter, ole hoss. We'll see what a traitor's doom comes to. If 'twar my own brother I'd help put the rope around his neck."

Buffalo Rube found some difficulty in gaining the camp, for there were enemies in the forest between that point and the place where he had left his friends, and the moonlight was bright, but he managed to elude them, and reached the rope ladder some ten minutes before Hickory Harry put in an appearance after his desperate flight.

When Ben Rawson heard what Buffalo Rube had to say he turned white, and an oath fell from his lips. This was the more astonishing, as he had never been known to swear before.

"Buffalo Rube, you bring me evil news, the more so because I loved the boy and he had been very dear to Birdie. It is hard to believe this, but— There, don't flare up; my own ears told me the truth two weeks ago, though I could not credit it. What are we coming to when one can deceive us in that way? I would have staked my life on Harry, but the evidence you bring, combined with what my own ears heard, tells me there is no hope."

The old man actually groaned, for he was thinking of his sweet child. His eyes had seen, long ago, that her pure heart had been given to Hickory Harry, and he had rejoiced in the fact, but now that this had come up it would be a terrible task to make her believe in his guilt.

"For her sake, my friend, I entreat that you leave it all in my hands. I will deal justly with him, and the least show of treachery will be rewarded with instant death. Heaven give me courage to bear me out. This is the blackest hour of my life," and the venerable trapper bowed his head in his hands while his whole body shook with emotion.

"Ye spoke of hearin' something yerself. Hev ye any objections, seein' I'm in this affair heart an' soul, ter givin' me the particulars? I feel mighty bad myself, ole man; c'u'dn't feel wuss of 'twar my brother; but I know the difference between right an' wrong, an' if 'twar my brother, he should die," and Buffalo Rube's clinched hand came down into his other palm vigorously as he spoke, for the rough trapper's whole nature was worked up by this chain of strange circumstances that was being thrown around one of his comrades, and one whom he loved, at that.

The old leader of the brigade remained silent for almost a minute; then, lifting his head, he looked Buffalo Rube square in the eyes, as though he had decided to tell him all, now that he was in it so far.

"Two weeks ago, when we were on our way up here, I chanced to be off along, hunting through a belt of heavy timber. I was crawling up to a spot that it seemed to me must hold game when the sound of voices in conversation caught my ear.

"I was curious to know who the speakers were, more especially as I thought I recognized in one of them a fellow I knew, no other than our enemy of last season, Black Baptiste, the half-breed.

"So I crawled nearer, and at last could catch a few fragments of their conversation, though the men themselves were still invisible to me.

"My suspicions so far as Black Baptiste was concerned became verified, for it was that scoundrel. When I heard the other voice I started as if a rattlesnake had struck me, bent my ear again, and listened with all my power.

"Rube, I was ready to swear it was the voice of Harry Hastings. I could not believe it, but the evidence seemed overwhelming. In my consternation I failed to take particular note of what they were talking about, and only had a general idea afterward that it concerned our brigade, for the half-breed made an oath to wipe it out this year, which seemed to tickle his companion, for he laughed, just as I have heard Harry laugh a score of times and more.

"They separated and went their way, while I returned to camp, all desire to hunt having left me.

"Harry had arrived there before me, and with him he had brought the best part of an antelope, but that meat nearly choked me to eat it.

"Now, Rube, you see, as the days slipped by, the memory of that voice gradually grew fainter in my head and heart. I acted somewhat coldly toward the boy, but, looking on his frank, handsome face I would not believe him guilty of such a thing; there must be a mistake of some kind.

"So I have gone on up to this time when you, with your overwhelming proof, have crushed me to the earth. Oh, it is terrible, terrible to think of!"

"That it are, ole man. Kin ye tell me what under the heavens the boyee means?"

"Tell you? I could sooner tell you the number and age of the stars above us, Rube. He is loved by us all, makes as much as any man in camp, and—is beloved by the dearest little girl on earth. When he asked me about Birdie he spoke as never did I hear man speak before, and I have looked upon Harry as the finest, manliest young fellow I ever knew. What has possessed him to betray those who love him, and to cover his name with ignominy forever, Heaven alone knows. The lad must be mad, and yet he seems ever cool and collected."

The other jumped at the word.

"Thunder, I never thought of that! He must be mad, or at least have crazy spells. That would account for it all," he said, suddenly.

"Don't believe it. If Harry is bad at all, his heart is as black as sin. I have a painful task before me in the morning, telling Birdie she must not speak to him hereafter. This shall be my first act. The dear child will obey me though it will pain her heart as though—oh, my curse upon the man who for some petty reason could wreck his own life and those of others when the world looks bright beyond him."

The agony of the old trapper was intense, for he saw spread out before him, in perspective, all the consequences of Hickory Harry's treachery, and the very thought caused a feeling of mingled agony and rage to dart through his heart.

"Hark!" exclaimed Rube, suddenly, "there is the signal. It must be the lad himself come back."

He was right.

Hickory Harry made his appearance and gave a brief description of his fight, as has been related before, but he cut it short, for he could but notice the cold looks of the two men, and wondering greatly in what way he had offended, threw himself down by the fire.

From his condition it was evident that he had passed through some desperate encounter, but that this had been with the Hudson Bay trappers was all bosh to Buffalo Rube and his companion.

So suspicion rested on Hickory Harry; and there was treachery in the camp, too, for by the fire lay the man who was the cause of all this worry and anger. The young trapper, as he lay down to rest, did not see the head that was raised on the other side of the fire, nor was he aware of the glaring eyes that were fastened upon him from under the shadow of the agent's hat.

Hickory Harry had an enemy there.

CHAPTER XII.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER.

THE hour was late, and the camp wrapped in silence, for the men were slumbering heavily.

Once in a while the man on guard would come around the corner and replenish the fire, which, during the interval, had become low, after which he took up his old position again on the ledge near the spot where the rope ladder was situated.

It was the time when men sleep the most heavily, and dawn could not be more than two hours away. Silence, deep and profound, seemed to reign over the whole surrounding neighborhood.

At this time, a head was raised.

It was that of the agent who had reached the camp that evening.

He slowly raised his head a few inches from the bundle on which it had been resting, and his keen eyes seemed to rest upon each slumbering form around the fire, as if he was making absolutely sure that each one of the men was fast locked in slumber.

When he had decided in his mind that this was so, the agent silently arose to his feet.

His movements were perfectly natural so long as he remained within the range of the dim fire-light, but not the slightest sound did he make. He yawned and stretched his arms, but the movement was noiseless. Then he walked away, and though he seemed to exercise no particular pains about stepping, the foot-falls of a cat could not have been lighter than his.

First of all he came to a halt beside a large rock, and turning, fastened his eyes upon the form of Hickory Harry, who was in plain view. The man's orbs seemed to fairly scintillate, and his teeth grated together until the sound produced was not unlike the grating of a file over iron.

There could be no doubt about the feeling he entertained for the young trapper. Hate would have been a mild word to have applied to it.

Having satisfied himself with this glance, the agent turned away, and walked quietly to the edge of the cliff. The moon was behind the mountain and although it was not absolutely dark in the singular little valley where the trappers had pitched their camp, yet the figure of a man standing erect upon the edge of the abrupt descent would not be apt to attract attention either from above or below, and while the agent stood there, unless he made some extravagant gestures, or else created a disturbance, he was not likely to betray his presence to any one in the camp.

The sentry!

He had forgotten him, but it did not matter, for the spot was not visible from his post; and then, again, the mysterious agent did not intend making a noise.

He dropped upon his knees and seemed to be fixing something which so engrossed his attention that he knew nothing of the dark form crawling closer and closer to him. The first intimation he had of another's presence was a hand laid heavily upon his arm.

Wheeling abruptly the agent found himself face to face with the trapper who was acting as sentry.

The man had not come upon him by accident, nor had he been disturbed at his post by any suspicious noise on the part of the agent. To tell the truth, Buckskin Bob had not remained at his post very much on this night, for he had skulked among the rocks most of the time, with his eyes glued upon the seemingly slumbering form of the agent. Did he suspect treachery on the part of the new-comer, or was there another motive in his soul? At any rate one would judge he was not unknown to the agent, by the way in which he pulled his hat down over his face.

When the agent found himself staring into the face of one of the trappers, an oath burst from his lips although in a guarded tone of voice.

"Confusion!" he gritted out between his teeth.

"Not quite," said the other, calmly, but at the same time sinking his own voice into a whisper, "we are not strangers, my friend, but old acquaintances. I have heard enough from various sources to inform me of the object of your presence here. Nay, do not start; I would not betray you for the world, but I, too, have an object that I would like to accomplish, and as it is inimical, like yours, I do not see but that we can work together though I do not wish to touch my hands with your dirty job."

The agent winced a little at his sharp words and then laughed lightly as though amused. He recognized the other now as an old comrade.

"I can guess what you mean. You have managed to fall in love with the partisan's daughter, and there is a rival in the case. Harry Hastings has stepped into your path as he once stepped into mine?"

There was an interrogative in the words, and so the other chose to take it in the form of a question.

"Right," he replied, "and but for my hatred

of taking an unfair advantage of him I would have put him out of the way long ere this. I dared not meet him in a fair duel, and was not cunning enough to devise a method equal to that *coup de grace* of yours near Fort Williams whereby you got him to fight a duel with his chum, and kill—murder him I had almost said, for the other was too drunk to stand up."

The agent laughed.

It would make a cold shiver run over the frame of an honest man to have heard the diabolical glee contained in that cold, half-chuckling laugh that he uttered. It was the laugh of a fiend-incarnate, rejoicing over some deviltry of the dim past.

"I fancy that was a neat trick of mine; but, look here, why didn't you tell the girl's father about it? There never could be a better method of getting rid of a rival, for when they learned the story there is not a trapper in the camp who would not look upon him with anger and disgust, for Nick Norris was well known in the south where they came from."

"I had no proofs and I dreaded his vengeance. You see he does not suspect that I was among the number who saw that fight, and has been quite friendly with me. Now that you are here a word from you will go further than all I can say, though I shall be ready to back you up with my evidence if need be. I want you to see Ben Rawson the first thing in the morning and tell him the story of the fatal duel."

"I will do it, and call on you to corroborate me if he doubts my words," said the agent grimly.

"Then the plot is laid; you can go on with your own scheme as it pleases you. I shall not interfere, neither shall I take sides with you. To tell the truth, Raymond, I would be one of the first to pounce upon a traitor like you and string him up, only that disappointed love has made a devil out of me. The demon of jealousy makes me hate your cousin, and that feeling seems to have blunted all my natural hatred for everything that is vile. Go on with what you were doing; I shall be blind for the next half-hour, but be careful lest you wake up one of the others."

Buckskin Bob was truly to be pitied.

Naturally he was a fine young man, but, as he himself declared, jealousy had entered his heart and blunted his perceptions of right and wrong. His mind was in a constant whirl as he resumed his post and paid no attention to the quarter where he had left the villainous agent. To tell the truth, he was in that desperate frame of mind when one cares not how soon something terrible happens, and total annihilation seems the sweetest boon the soul could crave.

One moment he was cursing himself for having made such a compact with a man whom he had always detested when he knew him before; the next and he was laughing to himself in fiendish glee to realize what a terrible doom was hanging over the head of his rival, and the thought that it had been materially assisted by his hand made his laugh the longer.

When Buckskin Bob had left him, the agent once more dropped upon his hands and knees. Once he raised himself up and followed the shadowy retreating form of the other with his eyes until it vanished.

"Curses on you for a born fool, do you think I have no feelings? There you stood prating about your hatred for vile work like mine. I'll have your tongue for those words, my dandy friend. You would like me to assist you in your design very much, and because it pleases me to deal this beloved cousin of mine another deadly blow where his affections are concerned, I shall enter heart and soul into it; but do not lay the flatteringunction to your soul that it is done because you wish it.

"I hate such half-way villains as you seem about to become. Give me the fiend in human shape, the devil incarnate, who hesitates at nothing, in preference to the man whose heart harbors thoughts just as bad but whose soul is too timid to strike a blow.

"Well, I'll pretend to work with you my friend. Somehow you have my secret in your possession, and I must guard that against discovery; but, wait until this camp passes into other hands and then we shall see where your sneering tongue will be. No man dares flaunt my crimes in my face like that, and escapes scot free. Aha, if they but knew the secret of that duel; but there was not a soul save one who ever did possess the secret, and he died the instant it flashed into his brain. That was Nick Norris, and his chum murdered him right there. Of course he did, who dares deny it?" and the agent, as he hoarsely whispered these words,

glared around him as though half expecting an answer from the empty air.

As no reply was forthcoming he turned his attention to the work in hand. It was his intention to signal to his comrades that he was safe in camp. They would understand, also, that he intended giving them the chance they wished, to dispose of the inmates of the camp on the following night, when he would drug every soul of them and then invite his friends to the defenseless camp where treachery and cunning had given them the victory without the cost of a blow.

He had a small lantern fashioned something after the style of a dark lantern; at least its light could only be seen from one side. This he had been fixing while kneeling upon the ground. When it was ready to ignite he lit a match under his hat so that the light would not betray him, and applied it to the wick of the candle.

Leaning over the edge of the cliff he held the light down so that it could only be seen far away in the forest. He held this here for at least ten minutes, meanwhile cursing under his breath at the stupidity of his friends in not keeping a sharper watch.

No man knew better than the agent the peril involved in his treacherous mission, but he scorned danger, being one of those reckless spirits who think only of the reward to come.

If these trappers ever found out his real character, death would be visited upon him with the speed of the lightning bolt, yet he risked all. A push would have sent him over the edge, to find a terrible death on the rocks below, but there was no one to deal this blow of deliverance for the trappers.

At length there came, from the far-away forest, the singular cry of the night-hawk, repeated twice. Then the agent made several signals with his lantern after the manner of a freight conductor on a train. When there came to his ears the mournful cry of the wolf with a singular winding-up, the man appeared satisfied, for he extinguished his lantern and replaced it under his coat.

The flat had gone forth now, and unless there came an accident of some sort, the camp, together with its inmates was doomed to fall into the hands of their allied enemies, the half-breeds and Blackfeet.

As he was about to arise to his feet he suddenly gave a start, and then became as stiff as a piece of parchment with guilty horror, for from directly below him there came a voice full of wonder, uttering the words:

"Mustangs an' Mexicans! dust my Sunday breeches! war thet a comet let loose?"

It was Roaring Ralph the reckless ranger!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SERPENT'S TONGUE.

CONFUSION!

That was what seized upon the traitor spy when he heard those words below him. He had met with the speaker before, and knew at once that it was Roaring Ralph Rockwood, the most reckless ranger on the border.

No wonder then his hand trembled as it still lay upon the lantern which he had just placed within his pocket. Discovery stared him in the face, and none knew better than he what that portended.

The ranger, though perhaps puzzled by the strange nature of the fire trail he had seen extending from the cliff above out among the tree-tops, would speedily gain an inkling of the truth upon reflection, and his first act, no doubt, upon reaching the camp, would be to awaken the old partisan and tell him what he had seen. Then the truth would speedily come out.

Only for a few seconds did the agent remain frozen thus with horror and dismay at the close ness of discovery. Then he drew in a long breath, clinched his teeth, and "Richard was himself again."

Thoughts flew through his mind with the rapidity of lightning. His face was screwed up in the very act of planning. Then, as a low, chuckling laugh of triumph escaped his lips, all became smooth sailing before him. No longer did discovery threaten to overwhelm him with shame, or beckon the grim monster death to its assistance. He had found a means of escape, practical, expedient, and at the same time cunning.

Roaring Ralph was doubtless on his way to where the rope ladder hung down, intending to give the signal and have it lowered still more until it was within his reach. Then there were five minutes left to him in which he must rid his act of the taint of suspicion.

What a jolly thing it was to have a scapegoat ever near on whom could be visited all his iniquities!

The agent smiled broadly several times as with noiseless steps he made his way over to the camp.

All was as he had left it, and his eyes gleamed like those of a tiger when they fell upon the slumbering form of Hickory Harry.

Wearied from the terrible exertions that had marked the earlier portion of this night with him, the young trapper slept as soundly as a man utterly tired out can do.

With the silent progress of a cat the agent crept nearer to the young man. Now and then he cast a sweeping glance around the camp, but all seemed quiet as death. He had no idea that from under his arm, Blue Bill the trapper, who lay behind him, was watching his movements with a tremendous amount of surprise and curiosity.

Reaching the form of his slumbering cousin, the agent stooped over and deftly introduced the closed lantern underneath the little bundle of extra clothing that served Hickory Harry for a pillow.

Just as he arose, after accomplishing this dastardly deed, the signal was given by Roaring Ralph beyond the rocks, and he could hear some words passing between that worthy and Buffalo Rube before the sentry would lower the rope to the impatient ranger below.

The agent gave one glance around him with a smile of devilish import upon his face. Then he sought the dark niche where he had thrown himself to sleep during the earlier part of the evening, and prepared to see what followed while pretending to be fast locked in the arms of Morpheus.

His wicked plot had been so far accomplished; he had no idea that it was known to the partisan that there was a spy in camp, but, for fear of the consequences when Roaring Ralph made his report, as he would speedily do, the cunning agent had so arranged matters that suspicion would fall upon Hickory Harry, never dreaming under what a ban that unfortunate young man had already been placed, thanks to the remarkable combination of circumstances—and himself.

"Buffler hides, but what does that mean?" asked Blue Bill of himself, as he watched the final movements of the agent, but he could not understand, and was about to pass away into dreamland again when he was aroused by the entrance of a greasy, leather-clad individual into the camp.

It did not take him long to recognize in this individual Roaring Ralph, the reckless ranger, and so glad was he to see the hero of a score of desperate deeds, that he was on his feet in a twinkling.

They had often been on the trail together, and the Colorado ranger was equally glad to see Blue Bill, of whom he inquired in a few minutes where the partisan could be found, saying that he had something for his ear. Blue Bill directed him to the spot where the tent stood, and informed him the partisan could be found by poking his head through the opening and speaking his name in a low tone, so that Birdie, who slept in the rear part of the structure, would not hear. Roaring Ralph proceeded to the lodge, and poking his head in, pronounced the name of the partisan as directed, and in another minute was in earnest conversation with Ben Rawson, just outside the tent.

Their talk was carried on in low tones, but it was evident to Blue Bill that the partisan was much excited. He was curious to know what all these strange doings meant, but as no one offered to take him into confidence, he retained his little secret of the agent's actions, and which might have raised from the head of Hickory Harry the terrible web of suspicion that was fast being woven around him.

Of course both the men could only see in this suspicious light that had caught the eyes of Roaring Ralph a signal of some sort.

The sounds that had come to the ears of the reckless ranger from the forest had proclaimed this much, and the two men, knowing and believing what they did, could not have any difficulty in placing the blame upon the proper person.

Their eyes were turned upon the form of Hickory Harry, but a contemptuous sneer mantled their faces at his attitude, for of course it was assumed. The agent saw the direction of their glances, and he chuckled to himself with satisfaction at the way in which his plot was working even though he could not understand how suspicion could have already attached itself to his cousin before the tell-tale lantern was found.

Fate was evidently playing the game into his hands neatly enough.

Ben Rawson checked a groan in his throat at this additional evidence against Hickory Harry, and then, after a few parting words with Roaring Ralph, he once more entered the tent; but not to sleep, for the weight upon his mind was too great.

With the early dawn the trappers were astir, and the agent was among the first to rise. He was one of those men to whom a few hours' sleep alone is necessary, and who remain awake as long as possible. Dreams are often more horrible than realities to such men, and they prefer to face the real dangers than those of a disordered mind.

His interest was intense however when he saw Ben Rawson come up to the reckless Colorado ranger who was standing close by, for he could see in the partisan's hand the lantern he had slipped under Hickory Harry's impromptu pillow.

Somehow the traitor spy seemed to fear discovery. He was not anyway frightened, not being that sort of nature, but when the thought of discovery flashed into his mind, he realized the terrible result of being found out in his true colors with all of these fire-eaters around him, who would no more hesitate about cutting him to pieces than if he was a coyote of the prairie that had disturbed their slumber.

No wonder, then, that his hand fell upon his revolver as he held his breath and waited the denouement if such was fated to come to pass.

"There is the article that made the light you saw last night," said the partisan, handing the Colorado ranger the lantern, which Roaring Ralph proceeded to examine.

"Sculps an' sausingers! Shoot me fur a Greaser of that ain't a queer contrivance. Jest the identical meteor I saw last night, tar an' feather me ef it ain't now," he muttered in his great surprise.

Then he looked up. There could be no mistake about the meaning of the look he gave the partisan. Just as surely as if words had been used it inquired of him where the tell-tale lantern had been found, and by the way the old trapper clinched his teeth, Roaring Ralph's unasked question was answered.

"Yes, I found this on the very spot where he laid down. There is no doubt of it: Hickory Harry is the guilty man, and he must die. If he were my own son I would pronounce that doom upon him."

The heart of the spy beat free again for he saw that all was working well in his favor. As for Roaring Ralph he could only faintly mutter that time-worn phrase that seemed suited with him to all periods of intense excitement or bewildering amazement:

"Dust my Sunday breeches!"

At this moment the agent saw his chance, and boldly joined the two men. The evidence was too strong against his cousin to think of their suspecting him, even when they did realize that the names were the same; but to make matters more certain he intended to drive a fresh rivet in the shackles that bound Hickory Harry.

"Your pardon, gentlemen, but by accident I chanced to overhear your remarks about a certain man of whom I have quite a story to tell, that can be corroborated if need be by Buckskin Bob over there, who also chanced to be a witness of the terrible affair, though I believe he has kept quiet in regard to it.

"I hate to see a scoundrel imposing on honest people, and this man has certainly done so with you all to a shameful degree. I ought to know him, friends, for he is my cousin. True, I am ashamed to own the relationship, but there is no means of getting out of it.

"A year and a half ago he had a chum named Nick Norris, the best fellow the world ever knew. They used to swear by each other, there was such a pretense of love between them, but it was all bosh, on the side of Harry, at least.

"I don't know exactly how it came about, for I was away from the fort, but I came upon the spot just in time to see the terrible tragedy that closed it.

"This redoubtable cousin of mine had picked a quarrel with his chum. Now, you must know, Nick was a perfect devil when under the influence of liquor, though the best fellow living when not drunk. He would have fought his grandmother under such circumstances without realizing in the least what he was doing. At any rate, Harry Hastings indulged in a quarrel with him, and the result was a duel which I rode up just in time to witness.

"Nick was so drunk they had to brace him up against a tree, and he could not have hit a barn

at that distance. They fired, and Nick Norris fell, shot through the heart by his chum!"

"Horrible," murmured the partisan.

"Tomcats an' tadpoles!" exclaimed Ralph.

"There could be no doubt about it. Ask your man, Buckskin Bob. He will tell you the particulars for I only know the outlines; but, of all the mean, dastardly things I ever saw done, that shooting of Nick Norris was the worst. Why, gentlemen, in some places where I have been they would look upon it as a murder and punish it with lynch law," said the smooth-tongued agent, who certainly had as good reason to congratulate himself on the success of his plotting as ever did villain.

"Hanging would certainly be a just doom for a man who could shoot his friend when drunk; there is no excuse for such a crime," said the partisan with more than his usual loudness of tone.

The words reached the ears of one for whom they were not intended. He started, gasped for breath, and then hurried away, pressing his hands upon his temples and muttering to himself.

"Heaven help me, that terrible story has reached *his* ears. It accounts for his coldness. Birdie is lost to me. Would that I had died in the canyon!"

It was brave but unfortunate Hickory Harry.

CHAPTER XIV.

A FATAL DUEL.

THE morning broke, and busy preparations were made for the meal. Some dark cloud seemed to hover about the camp. The men had no suspicion that there was treachery at work, but they knew the forest and mountains were full of Blackfeet and Hudson Bay half-breeds whom they were destined to come into deadly contact with before many days.

There was to be a grand battle for the possession of the rich trapping grounds, and whichever side won was to have the undisputed right of enjoying the field open to them. Feeling thus, and knowing that the Blackfeet were as thick as berries, none of the men thought of leaving the camp on this day.

Preparations were entered into that seemed suspicious, to say the least, and it became evident, to the treacherous agent that the Nor'-west men were expecting a speedy meeting with their foes, though of course they had no idea of how soon it would come. He was not much troubled by the work he saw going on around him, of cleaning guns and pistols, preparing huge rocks to be thrown down from the cliffs upon the heads of those below, and various other devices for giving the trappers additional strength in case of an attack.

"Post a dozen sentries for all I care," he chuckled; "it will not prevent the working of my plot. There will be an agent at work that will overpower the arms of the most wakeful man. Ha, ha!"

Of course he referred to the drug which he intended putting into their pot of soup, from which every person in the camp would sup, and as a result, when his friends, the allies, arrived, the camp would fall into their hands without a blow.

Ah, if he could but have foreseen what was fated to come to pass before another twelve hours had gone by! The Fate which he had defied so long was now closing round about him, tired of having been defied so often. He based his plans upon these several facts:

In the first place, those who expected treachery would never think of looking for it in that way, as they doubtless expected the attack would be made first and then the matter consummated by having the camp given over to the enemy.

Again, Hickory Harry was the man suspected, and upon him the eyes of those in the secret would be fastened. If by any chance the act was accomplished without their being witnesses of it, and should fail through some ill-luck, the blame would all be laid upon his shoulders, and vengeance speedy and sure would descend upon Harry.

The day passed slowly to all concerned.

Hickory Harry saw the old partisan having a long conversation with Birdie, and his heart sunk like lead as his thoughts told him what it was about.

"He is telling her about that wretched affair. Poor Nick, and yet you are better off in your lonely grave than I am here. All is lost now, and there is nothing left for me but death," he muttered, but his eyes wistfully watched the two in such close conversation.

He saw the young girl go toward her tent cringing, and his heart seemed to be full to overflowing, but he gave no sign of the agony he

endured. All day long he kept aloof from the others, and answered nothing to the jokes of his friends who were ignorant of the suspicions regarding his loyalty.

To the partisan this strange conduct was easy of explanation, for he thought the young man was feeling the gnawing of remorse for what he was about to do.

What he experienced that day could not be told in words, but it was a constant battle that raged within his breast. At times the love he bore Hickory Harry fought hard for the mastery, but the suspicions that had been verified, and the terrible evidence that had accumulated against the young trapper, were too strong, and crushed this affection back whenever it showed the least sign of life.

To the young man himself the day was perhaps one of the most bitter of his whole life. He had not the remotest suspicion of what terrible facts were arrayed against him, beyond that one great secret of his past which had come to light, and every cold look bent upon him during the day by the partisan or Roaring Ralph he laid to this cause.

It had been a terrible weight upon his heart of late, and he had often felt a shiver run through his whole frame at the touch of gentle Birdie's hands, for it seemed almost a sacrifice for one, upon whose hand lay the guilt of his chum's death, even though his soul might be free from it, to claim the love of so pure a being as the Song Bird of the trapper camp.

He wrestled with the truth in an agony of spirit, and then sat calmly down to consider the question from all sides, grimly resolved to know the worst.

"As Heaven is my judge I am innocent of all intent to kill poor dear Nick. Why, I loved him like a brother. He insulted me, forced me into the fight, and I stood up resolved to let him have his satisfaction for I knew he would not be able to hold his rifle steady.

"Then the word came; I raised my gun and fired at the tree above him, yet he fell, and they showed me where my bullet went, straight through his heart. Father in Heaven, I came near going mad at the sight. How could it be when I aimed so high? They laughed at my words. Nick was dead and my bullet had killed him. I could not stand the sight longer, but fled as I would from a pest, but his spirit has never haunted me, for to my last breath I will swear that I never once thought of harming my chum, for whom I would have laid my life down at any time if necessary.

"Well, let them tell her all. She may despise me now, and I can not blame her, but never while I live can I forget that I have lived, and that in the sight of Heaven I have been worthy of her, so far as a man ever could be. Farewell hopes of happiness, and the angel love I have gained, and welcome death, for I have no wish to live longer."

It must needs be something terrible that can make a young man in good health deliberately resolve to thus seek death rather than live on. Not that Hickory Harry thought of suicide, but when the chance came to throw himself in the breach he would face a thousand foes, defy them all, and die, pierced by a hundred wounds.

Such were the bitter reflections of the young man during the whole day. He kept aloof from every one except when positively required to be in the company of some one.

Still, his manner was not sullen and morose.

There was a proud reticence about him that caused the fact to be particularly noted among the men, but he bore himself in a manly way that could but have excited the admiration of the old partisan had he been aware of the fact that the young man knew his secret was no longer his own.

He made no attempt to gain an interview with the Song Bird of the cave.

She had not made her appearance since retiring after that tearful interview with the partisan, and as the latter remained in the vicinity of the lodge the greater part of the day, such a thing would have been impossible even had the young hunter wished it.

The day passed monotonously slow to all in camp. No one left, for the partisan, acting under the information he had received, did not care to allow his men to risk death for nothing.

There was hardly a man among these brave trappers who but wished the coming fight was already near at hand, for their blood was becoming sluggish and needed stirring up. Danger they laughed at, for to them it had been a companion all the days of their lives, and familiarity with the worst of horrors very often breeds contempt in the mind.

At the earnest solicitation of Ben Rawson, the

old Colorado ranger entered the lodge and had quite a long conversation with Birdie. Roaring Ralph had gone in with the intention of erasing forever from her heart the love she bore the young trapper. He came out almost as firm in his belief of Harry's innocence as the young girl herself, though he was all puzzled and at sea with regard to the accusing circumstances.

She had laughed to scorn his story of Kansas Kate. Not a doubt entered her mind but that it was some mistake, or a causeless persecution of the young man by this woman.

Then she told several manly, noble deeds she had seen Hickory Harry accomplish, and declared that it was as impossible for him to be concerned in the woman scrape as for the sun to stand still, or Roaring Ralph to speak French, a language he hated.

The old ranger believed it.

As to the story of his fatal duel, the girl scorned it, and declared with so much vehemence her belief that this agent was at the bottom of the whole business, as to quite startle the old ranger, and set him to thinking seriously whether there might not be some truth in that view of the case.

When he told her of the contemplated treachery, and his suspicions that it would be attempted on this very night, Birdie's eyes flashed with a sudden resolution, and she demanded that the old ranger assist her in fully proving Hickory Harry's innocence or branding him as a traitor of the deepest dye.

To all of this Roaring Ralph could only agree, but he did it with a willingness that spoke better than words could have done how completely he was enthralled by the sweet siren who confided her plans in his ears.

Ben Rawson had no idea what was being planned within the lodge, but he certainly could have offered very little objection to it had he been aware of the turncoat Roaring Ralph had become. The old ranger had been sent into the tent to destroy Birdie's love for such an unworthy object, but the little heathen converted him, and the result was the would-be missionary came out firm in the belief that Hickory was an angel, whom circumstances, perhaps something else, had grievously wronged.

Somewhat or other, the old ranger felt a little guilty after thus going over to the enemy, and during the remainder of the afternoon he avoided the partisan as if he were indeed a leper. Still, his spirits did not seem to suffer, for he told long yarns of such devilish mechanism as to make his listeners' hair stand on end, sung songs, and was the merriest of the merry.

Occasionally his thoughts would fly to the strange pair whom he had left in the hollow tree, but having decided to go to them after darkness had set in, Roaring Ralph was not worried about them.

"Ramrods an' rifles!" he said, emphatically; "if that greenhorn o' a nigger goes an' gits his head inter trouble, it'll be so much the wuss for him. I never seen sich a lunatic in my life. Atween him an' the tin pans it are enough ter make a feller go wild. Them's my sentiments, Roaring Ralph Rockwood's, you bet."

The afternoon passed away and the shades of evening settled upon the forest, mountain and stream. In the west the last gleams of light faded away, and the darkness of night came on—a night that was to be remembered for long years by these hardy men of the border.

The tragedy was drawing near!

CHAPTER XV.

SATAN'S IMP.

THE agent who had come into the camp, grew somewhat nervous as evening drew on. At least, as one would judge from his actions, for he started at the least word addressed to him, and seemed on the *qui vive* for something, by the manner in which he looked around him, and seemed to take note of each man, as if actually counting them.

This was just what he was doing.

They were all present but Roaring Ralph, and as that worthy had announced his intention of leaving for a scout, and to see how his *protégés* were getting on, it was easy to account for his absence.

The November night had closed in early.

In half an hour, perhaps sooner, preparations would be commenced for supper, and if he intended doing his work at all he must be about it soon.

Hickory Harry got up and left the fire, but sharp eyes noticed his movement, though the partisan nor Buffalo Rube stirred a peg. The agent sauntered away in a nonchalant manner, and once behind the bushes, came to a halt and peered back to see if his departure caused any

disturbance, but no one seemed to have noticed it, and, reassured that they did not entertain the remotest suspicion of his treachery he glided through the bushes.

The spring was about forty yards from the camp, and reached by a path. From this point one could look around and behold the beetling crags with which the strange little valley was encompassed, outlined against the heavens.

The night was not dark, for the stars gave some light that was assisted by the roaring camp-fire of the trappers. Their exact whereabouts was known to every Indian and half-breed in the forest, so that there was no need of hiding or using any precaution. If the allies intended attacking them the sooner the assault was made the better they would relish it.

When the agent reached the spring he looked hastily around him, but there was not the least sign of human presence nearer than the camp-fire, which could be seen glowing and blazing through the branches and twigs.

It had been the intention of the traitor spy to first pour the sleeping compound into the huge pot of soup that would soon be placed upon the fire, but upon reflection he had deemed it too hazardous. If his action was observed by any of the eyes around the fire, then the game was up. It might be better perhaps to put the compound into the pool itself and then the same benefit would be derived from it without the danger of exposure.

The pool was a singular formation.

It was in a deep hollow, seemingly of the solid rock, and could easily be leaped across by any agile person. There was something mysterious about the water pocket, insomuch that no one could tell where the water came from, how it entered the basin, and where it made its exit. If a bucket was filled, it soon came back to the original mark, about six inches beneath the rim.

Like a thief in the night the man crept near the spring, as it was called. Guilt makes a coward of the bravest, and the rascally agent looked over his shoulder and around at the barely discernible bushes as many as half a dozen times.

Then he drew out a flask, shook it, and held it up to his ear so that he might hear a sizzling sound from within. Satisfied that it was in good working order, he pulled out the cork. The flask was held over the water and in another instant some of its contents would have been mingled with the pool, but at this juncture a human form arose from the bushes and gripped the extended arm. The grasp was that of iron, and at the same time as flexible as a rubber hand, so that there was no breaking it.

"What would you, friend?"

The voice that pronounced these words sent a thrill through the frame of the agent, for he recognized it as belonging to Hickory Harry, his cousin, and the man whose ruin he sought at any expense.

"How dare you seize me in that way? Unhand me, ruffian!" said the agent in a low but fearfully intense tone, as if furious with anger.

Like lightning his thoughts were flying and began to see a means of crawling out of the ditch by throwing Hickory Harry into it, though his plan of giving the camp over to the allies would fail.

His idea was to put the blame upon the shoulders of the man through whose instrumentalities his plot seemed about to be ruined. By boldly accusing the young trapper of the contemplated crime, he would be adding fuel to the flame that was destined to immolate him on the altar of circumstantial evidence, and would also bring him out of the scrape with flying colors. Therefore he felt his reckless nature rising again, hence the demand for the other to release him.

"Why do I hold you? It is quite patent. You are a villain, Henry Hastings, and your presence here means mischief to others as well as myself. You it is to whom I owe all the misery I have felt on earth. Tell me, what were you about to do? What does that flask contain?"

The stern words nettled the other but he laughed softly feeling that the game was still his.

"I refuse to tell you, now unhand me."

"I shall not. I have such a poor opinion of you that I would not be surprised if you were about to poison every one in camp in order to obtain some selfish end. Ha! you start! Then I was not so far from the truth. Have I then succeeded in foiling you in one of your dastard deeds?"

The agent again laughed—such a terrible, cold laugh, it was enough to chill one's blood.

"Fool, dolt, listen to me, and see how you

have put your foot into the trap. To you I confess that my heart is with the Hudson Bay men. The real agent was murdered on his way here, and the papers in his possession changed so as to make it appear that I was the man. The rest is easily understood. It has been my intention, all along, to give the camp over to the allies, and this is but a part of my scheme.

"The flask that I hold contains a sleeping draught, wonderfully powerful, so that if I mixed it with the waters of the spring here, no man who drank could ever resist the influence. Thus the camp would be at the mercy of the allies when they came."

The villain told this story with as much nonchalance as though relating a little episode or an encounter with some wild beast in the forest.

"Scoundrel, you have betrayed yourself. Now, I shall call my comrades hither and have you placed where you belong, under bonds," cried Harry.

"Not so fast, my impulsive young friend. I have told you what my purpose is, it is true, but there was an object in the recital. Listen to me while I crush that spirit out of you. Ben Rawson, Buffalo Rube and Roaring Ralph Rockwood are ready to swear that you are the guilty man, the traitor."

"The partisan heard me conversing with Black Baptiste a week or so ago, and did me the honor to mistake my voice for yours. Then the other night Buffalo Rube heard two of my friends talking, and understood from their remarks that there was a spy in this camp named Hastings. That also told against you, for they seemed to forget that I was also of the same name. As a clincher I may add this

"Last night I signaled to my friends with a little pocket-lantern. The flash was seen by that greasy Colorado ranger from below, and upon coming into camp he communicated what he had discovered to the partisan. Strange enough, this morning the identical little lantern was found upon the very spot where you had lain.

"You see, my guileless young cousin, you are no match for me. As you say, I have been your evil genius ever since childhood. I have never forgotten the blow you gave me, and the mark of which I bear upon my forehead to day."

"But at last you have overreached yourself; at last you fall into your own pit, and the vengeance of these trappers will forever sweep you from my path," cried Harry, exultantly.

"Not so," replied the other, quietly, but with a strong vein of sarcasm in his voice, "on the contrary the vengeance of the trappers will complete my schemes for your destruction and sweep you from my path forever."

"Listen, and realize how neatly you are trapped. The alarm is given, the men rush here and find us struggling. They will find, also, the flask upon the ground. There you heard it drop. Now, which do you suppose they will believe—I, the unsuspected agent whose authority here is even greater than the partisan's, or you, the man, who, in half a dozen ways, has been proven guilty of treachery? Ha! that is where I have you. Shout, call them hither as speedily as possible and feel how soon the halter encircles your throat."

A groan burst from Hickory Harry.

"It is not life that I care for, that has lost all its charms since I lost Birdie Rawson through your devilish ingenuity, but it cuts me to the quick to think that those I love will look upon me as a guilty man. Fiend, devil incarnate, impostor, I will have your life first and then they can do with me as they will. Welcome death, for I have nothing more to live for."

There was almost a wail in the last words of the young man. The plots against him had seemed to work so well that all he cared for on earth was lost to him, and death had no horror.

As he spoke he threw himself upon his cousin like a wild-cat. Stinging under a sense of the wrongs inflicted upon him by this man, he seemed possessed of herculean strength. The reader has already seen that the name given to him was no misnomer, for he was in truth, not unlike a young hickory tree.

A single yell of alarm broke from the lips of the agent, and then the fingers of the desperate young trapper closed about his throat.

They struggled like two monster oaks, storm-tossed. The treacherous agent was no puny child, but every atom of his strength was needed just then for his combatant was a man of steel. Besides, Hickory Harry was urged on by that terrible feeling of blank despair, and his hatred for this man who had been the cause of almost every trouble, great or small, that had come to him in life.

The struggle was fierce, but short.

That single yell, uttered by the agent in the sudden terror that overtook him before he was set upon by his cousin had reached the ears of the trappers, and brought them pell-mell to the spot.

If they had remained away but two minutes longer, Hickory Harry would have forever removed the snake who had ruined his life, from his path.

One of the men had snatched up a torch as he ran, and when they reached the spot, the truth, so far as the identity of the two combatants was concerned, was speedily made manifest.

Strong arms tore them apart, but it required three men to take Hickory Harry away from his intended victim. Once he found himself torn from the agent he became as docile as a child, standing with his head upon his chest, and not deigning to notice anything that was said.

"What does this mean?" demanded the partisan, looking from one of the foes to the other.

"It means," cried the agent, still gasping for breath, "that I detected this scoundrel in the act of poisoning the spring. See, there lies the flask at his feet that I knocked from his hand. He immediately turned upon me, and as I am still weak from a recent spell of sickness he would have murdered me but for your opportune arrival. What do you think of that?"

The partisan made no answer, but angry glances were bent upon the young man from the trappers.

"Dust my Sunday breeches, I think it are a dirty lie. Seize that man!" cried a voice just then, and Roaring Ralph Rockwood came flying over the spring, followed by a light, girlish form—Birdie Rawson, herself.

CHAPTER XVI.

HICKORY HARRY'S CHUM.

The appearance of Roaring Ralph Rockwood at this interesting time was one full of surprise to all the parties concerned.

He had cleared the pool with an agile bound landing on the other side close to where the principal actors in the little dramatic scene were standing. No sooner had he alighted upon the ground than he half raised his gun so that the muzzle bore upon the form of the agent, and then uttered the words given before.

If the trappers were astonished at the appearance of Roaring Ralph, they were amazed when the light form of Birdie Rawson followed him across the spring. The flambeau held by one of the men lighted up her face, and showed the flush of excitement that was plainly marked upon it.

The agent grew white in the face both from fear and passion. Somehow, it seemed as though his beautiful plan was to be nipped in the bud after all. Just how the exposure was to come he could not say, but a crisis was at hand.

The words of the Colorado ranger carried conviction with them, and while Hickory Harry was not released, several of the men laid hands on the agent, as though obeying Roaring Ralph's command would the sooner cause him to disclose what he knew.

Some of them even went so far as to believe in that short space of time, that both of the men were guilty and that they had fallen out over some thing or other. When thieves fall out, honest men get their dues and it was probable that the whole plot would now come me out.

"What does this mean, Rockwood? What have you to say?" demanded the partisan.

"Painters an' powder-horns! what hev I ter say? H'ist me inter a 'Pache's grave but I'm jest a-bu'stin' wi' all. I accuse that man, our agent, wi' being a traitor. He's ther Hastings that the half-breeds air a-waitin' fur below ter guy ther signal so they kin walk inter ther camp an' take possession. Search him an' my word for it ye will find evidence enough."

The agent resisted like a tiger but there were men present who had stood up against the fierce grizzly, and despite his struggles he was overpowered.

The partisan himself searched the man, and while this was going on Birdie stepped in front of Hickory Harry and his guards.

"Release him," she said, sharply.

They could but obey, seeing that the young trapper gave a sudden dexterous jerk just then that freed him. Strange to say Harry made no attempt to take the young girl in his arms or even raise her hand to his lips. He cast one glance upon her, oh, so full of infinite yearning and resignation to the inevitable, that it made her heart sink in despair to look upon, and then turned to the scene that was transpiring close at hand.

Upon the person of the agent they found proof enough to convict any man, but this did not entirely exonerate Hickory Harry. It might be, after all, as one of the men had imagined, that these two had been in partnership with the treacherous secret, and they had fallen out over some trivial thing, which eventually caused the fight and mutual accusation.

When the Colorado ranger learned what new idea was in the wind, he became fearfully indignant, and with many a queer expression he speedily told all that he had heard pass between the two men while he hid away in the bushes beyond the spring.

The trappers listened to him with amazement, for the cunning of the agent was now made so plain that no man could help seeing how easy it would have been for him to have thrown all the blame upon Hickory Harry, especially when the latter was already suspected.

If there was any additional evidence needed, they had it, for the Song Bird stepped forward and fully corroborated every word Roaring Ralph had uttered; and after that there was not a man but who was ready to swear to Hickory Harry's innocence.

The young trapper had stood there proudly, never offering a word in evidence. When the partisan came up to him Harry took his hand in silence. His heart had been too sorely tried by the load resting upon it to suffer him to speak.

"Comrade," said the partisan, "I trust you will harbor no ill-will against us for our unjust suspicions. We are all ashamed of them now, and beg your pardon. In token of my penitence—Birdie, come here;" and he raised his voice.

The young girl, blushing like a rose, did as he bid, and the partisan, placing their hands together was about to say something when the harsh voice of the agent broke in upon the little scene.

He had his legs bound, and lay upon the ground, but, raising himself upon his hand, was watching this beautiful little spectacle of reconciliation with a scowl of fiendish rage upon his face.

"Ha, ha, ha! you make a good show as a husband, Hickory Harry. Rawson, are you beside yourself? Do you forget what I told you this very morning? Would you give your daughter to a murderer? That man stood up to fight his chum in a duel when Nick Norris was so drunk he could hardly stand, and shot him dead. Accuse him of it; he will not dare to deny it."

At the words of the malicious agent, the young trapper turned as white as a sheet, and Birdie uttered a low cry of pain as she saw the change in his countenance. She would have sprung forward to look more closely in his face, perchance to put her arms about him, and breathe sweet words of confidence in his ear, but the partisan, who had also read the pale face of the handsome young trapper aright, caught her arm and drew her back.

For a full minute this terrible tableau was unbroken, and then the harsh voice of the treacherous agent again chimed in. Hickory Harry when he heard it, let his face drop upon his breast, and a deep groan broke from him that portrayed his feelings.

"Take her away from him. It would never do to mate one so pure with a sin-stained murderer. As soon might the panther and the doe mate. Take her away, and send him from the camp, the outcast he deserves to be. When I saw poor Nick Norris fall, I made a solemn oath that whenever I found this cousin of mine I would brand him with the mark of Cain. No peace should he have until death came. Sleeping or waking, the spirit of the man who lies beneath the sod on the border line shall haunt him—"

"Hold!"

It was Hickory Harry who spoke. He had suddenly thrown back his head and looked like a lion at bay. There was a flash in his eyes, a contemptuous curl in his lips as he gazed upon the fallen traitor.

"It is not for you, fiend, to speak thus, for, though my bullet killed Nick Norris by mistake, on your head lies the blame. You it was who tempted him to drink, well knowing what a fool he was apt to make of himself when drunk; you it was who put the stubborn idea into his head that I had wronged him and that a duel with me was the only thing left by which he could vindicate his honor. You it was who managed the whole business, and I have even imagined at times that in some mysterious manner you were really the man who shot him, for I could swear I aimed far above his head when I pulled the trigger. On your head more than

on mine rests the blame of Nick Norris's death."

"That has nothing to do with it. All that I claim is that you shot your chum dead when he was drunk. The bullet afterward, which had passed through his heart and entered the tree, corresponded with those belonging to your gun. There is a man in the camp here, Buckskin Bob by name, with whom I have talked on the subject. He was a witness to the foul crime, and will swear to it if need be."

"There is one little thing that you have neglected to mention," and at the words a stranger brushed past the trappers and stood where he could see all of the parties immediately concerned.

All present were amazed at his presence, for it seemed as though he had come from the air itself, and yet there was nothing mysterious about it. Had they not been so earnestly engaged a few minutes before in listening to the words of Roaring Ralph and the corroborative evidence of the young girl, the sound of the signal whistle might have been heard, followed by some questions on the part of the sentry which seemed to be answered with correctness, for he allowed the party of four to ascend the ladder.

Hickory Harry started when he heard that voice. It was that of the Unknown, who had assisted him after his escape from the half-breeds and the grizzly of the bluff. Again that strange feeling came upon him, and his mind seemed struggling to recollect something that just as strenuously avoided his memory.

As for the traitor spy, he started as if a rattlesnake had struck him with his deadly fangs, and glared at the stranger. Somehow he seemed to understand that the whole of his plot was about to fall into dismal ruins about him, though he could not tell in what way the sad catastrophe would come.

"There is one little thing that you have neglected to mention," repeated the strange hunter, who still had his hat drawn down to his eyes, "and that is the fact that later on a bullet was dug out from the tree some three feet above the hilt of an ordinary man, and which corresponded exactly with the one that had passed through Nick Norris.

"This brings the matter to another strange phase. Two bullets were fired from guns of the same bore, and yet but one shot was heard.

"There was a mystery in this.

"Hickory Harry there had sworn he aimed high, and granting that the bullet found up in the tree was his, who fired the other? Men who were keen as a knife-blade first probed the wound in the body of Nick Norris, and they made an astonishing discovery, though they kept it silent. He had stood with his left side slightly forward when firing, while the fatal ball had passed through him as if he had stood with the right side forward.

"Then the course of the ball into the tree was probed, and it was found to correspond with the facts I have given. The light of a great mystery began to break in upon them.

"Any one hiding in a patch of bushes to the right of the line occupied by the duelists could have sent in just such a shot; but there remained the mystery of the discharge.

"No man had heard more than the two reports, and there were those present who could have readily discerned another; besides, the smoke rising from the bushes would have betrayed the murderer. Those who investigated were puzzled, dumbfounded, but when they got the evidence of one man, all was made clear.

"There is such a thing as an air-gun, you know, my friends. This wretch, who hated Hickory Harry so heartily, brought on the duel, and then, knowing that he would shoot high above his chum's head, he had secreted himself in the bushes.

"When the two guns sounded, he discharged his powerful air-gun, sending the bullet through the body of Nick Norris. This foul fiend, who could stoop to such a crime, I have hunted ever since. You have him here in your clutches. Henry Hastings is the man."

The face of the agent had undergone a dozen changes during the telling of the Unknown's story, and it was now as white as a sheet. His teeth chattered with an undefinable dread, but he managed to stammer:

"How know you this? There was but one man saw me, and he is dead. With Nick Norris the secret of his death died also. Fiend, spirit goblin, who are you?" and the agent uttered a gasping cry as the other raised his hat and allowed his long hair to fall upon his shoulders.

"Nick Norris is back from the grave for vengeance!" he said, and in another instant he and Hickory Harry were in each other's arms.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN END TO THE FIRE TRAIL.

The condition of the treacherous scoundrel was anything but pleasant, and he could be heard gnashing his teeth as he watched the two chums embrace.

There was still another unpleasant surprise in store for him however, and it seemed as though the man was about to be set crazy by the sudden tumble taken by his fortunes.

Nick Norris presently came before him leading two women, one of whom the reader would recognize as Kansas Kate, the heroine of the border trail. The other was wonderfully like her, only a sad expression seemed to hover about her mouth. No wonder the rascally agent trembled when he saw this trio gazing upon him.

The trappers had hurried away because of orders received from the partisan, who had heard from Nick Norris that the allies were very close to the camp and evidently bent on an attack if their spy failed in his mission, so that, besides Hickory Harry, there were present only Birdie, the partisan, Roaring Ralph and that other ranger whom the reader has met, Buffalo Rube.

"Gentlemen," said Nick, "this wretch, after swearing everything of loyalty to this poor girl here, who gave him her love, basely deserted her to the scoffs of the world. I met her by chance just as she was about to end life by leaping into the Bravos, heard her story, loved her because I knew that in heart she was as pure as an angel, and made her my honored wife."

"When I learned that the man to whom she owed her shame was the one I hated so, I took a solemn vow to hunt him to the death, and since that time we have been on his trail night and day. That trail ends here; he will never leave here alive, and mine must be the hand to place the halter about his neck."

"Kansas Kate, here, is the sister of my wife. With only that poor old negro for protection she too, believing her sister dead, started upon the trail of vengeance. She fancied my Harry was the man, and I reckon it would have gone hard with him had she come across him before the truth came out."

Leaving the agent bound hand and foot and under the watchful eye of Buffalo Rube, the little party now returned to the camp-fire.

That the battle must occur there could be no reasonable doubt, and the sooner it was over the better, for then they could trap in peace without imagining that a foe was hidden behind every bush.

Nick Norris had brought some pleasing intelligence. This was to the effect that old Ben Hardy and his brigade, on the way further up the country, were camped not over ten miles away for a few days, and as he volunteered to reach the camp and bring their friends to the spot, his offer was gladly accepted by the partisan, who wished to give the allies a lesson that would keep them in check all winter; as they let down the rope ladder for Nick, and he vanished like a shadow.

Various signals could be heard in the forest as the night wore on, and it was evident that the allies were becoming impatient at the long delay of the spy in letting them know his success. About midnight there came a shrill whistle from the little valley where the spy lay bound hand and foot, and this was repeated twice.

A speedy investigation disclosed the fact that these sounds had emanated from him, and were without any doubt signals to inform the allies as to the failure of his plot to deliver over the camp to them. It might be expected that the attack would soon follow, and in this their calculations were not much out of the way, as events speedily proved.

Word was passed along the line that the allies were drawing closer. By the orders of the partisan, a spare rope ladder was left dangling where the enemy could find it, while the trappers above in their places of concealment remained as silent as death.

It was part of Ben Rawson's plan to deceive the wily Blackfeet into the belief that they were asleep and that the latch-string had by mistake been left hanging outside the door.

The more of the enemy they could dispose of the better it would be for them when the final struggle came, if indeed such was in store for them. The little plan worked to perfection. Presently a shaking of the rope ladder announced that one man was on his way up. Cautiously the daring fellow advanced until his head, rising above the rocky edge, proclaimed him a Blackfoot brave. His keen black eyes wandered around, and seeing nothing suspicious, the warrior pulled himself over the rock.

Then, turning, he gave vent to a singular little chirp that was evidently intended to convey to those below the fact of his safe arrival, and that the way was open for the next one. Hardly had this sound left his lips when a hand closed upon his throat with the tenacity of a vise, while other hands equally as strong drew him back from the brink. Then a knife was driven to his heart, and the body thrown aside behind the rocks.

By the time the two men were in their proper positions again, another brave was very near the top of the rope ladder. The same maneuver was gone through with in his case, and after Roaring Ralph had seized upon his throat, he gave the signal to those below.

This red-skin was disposed of as the first had been, and so well had the ranger imitated the signal to be used that those below were fully deceived, and a third warrior was on the way up even while they were bearing away the body of the second victim.

Six times was this gone through with successfully, the Indians below never suspecting where their comrades went to, and the trappers began to believe they were about to rid themselves of the whole Blackfoot nation if affairs kept on at this rate much longer.

The seventh was a failure, and yet the fault did not lie with the trappers. It chanced that the fellow upon reaching the top, placed his hand in a little pool of blood that had gradually gathered from the victims who had gone before. Instinct told him like a flash what this was. They saw him raise his hand, clinging to the rope with the other, and gaze upon the crimson stain in the light of the rising moon.

Then he uttered a shrill yell, and vanished from view just as the stout arms of Blue Bill shot out to grasp him by the neck and help him over the edge.

By the vibration of the rope ladder it could be seen that the fellow was speeding downward as rapidly as fear and astonishment could urge him. The truth was now made known to the allies, and no more execution could be done with the rope ladder, so Blue Bill at once determined that the wretch must be sacrificed at any rate.

Before the Blackfoot could have gone down more than a dozen feet the bloody knife of the ranger was upon the ropes. One quick slash and the rope ladder vanished from view. There was a thrilling shriek of horror, and then came the sullen thud that told of the ill-fated brave's arrival upon the rocks.

They could hear half-muffled yells from scores of throats, and then a deadly silence ensued. That the allies had no idea of giving up the fight the trappers knew well enough, and their only desire was to frustrate any plans that might be made dangerous to their position, and keep the enemy at bay.

The moon rose higher in the heavens and her bright rays lighted up the little valley where the camp of the trappers was situated. The traitor spy, lying there, bound hand and foot, would seem as though he must be ignorant of what was going on, but truth to tell he knew more than the rest of them.

Midnight had come and gone.

The captive agent lay on his right side, his face toward the cliffs that arose at the other side of the valley, and whose height was deemed inaccessible by the trappers, so that they had feared no danger from this direction.

It chanced, however, that one of the Indians knew of a secret pass which led to the cliffs, and by this means the allies reached the place where they were never looked for by our friends.

Lying there in a sullen mood, reflecting upon his unpleasant situation, the prisoner suddenly gave a start, and with difficulty repressed an exclamation of surprise and delight.

His eyes were glued upon the cliffs.

Surely he had seen a form upon the top, though it had immediately disappeared again. Had his eyes deceived him? Earnestly he gazed. Yes, there again he saw a form, unmistakably that of an Indian, though he seemed to vanish at once, seemingly sinking into the solid rock.

What under the heavens— Ha, an idea struck him. Eagerly he watched the cliff until another figure made its appearance, and when he, too, had vanished, the agent gave a sigh of relief.

He realized the truth now. The Indians were descending their own rope ladder in quick rotation, and the chances were that the trappers— His thoughts were interrupted. Buffalo Rube had been watching him intently, and seeing where his gaze was directed, soon caught sight of the figures upon the cliff, and also realized

the truth. Knowing that prompt measures were needed the trapper sprung forward, gagged the captive so that he could give no alarm, and then hastened away to gather his friends.

There was warm work in progress and the valley would soon ring with the sounds of hand to hand battle.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONCLUSION.

A SHOT rung out upon the night.

Following it came a wild yell of anguish that had a ring of Indian in it. Then there arose a Babel of sounds that told of a general *melee*, and above the reports of firearms could be heard the clear yells of the trappers, who fought like demons.

Up to this time they had indulged in no fight, and the sluggish wolf blood had been waiting for a chance to be aroused.

The time had come for them to awaken, and the manner in which they went for that band of red-skins and half-breeds, who had descended into the strange valley, was a surprise to say the least.

When they got through there was only one man of the whole lot alive, and this was an Indian. He had been disarmed, and, with the habitual bravery of the red-man, he had bared his bosom to the knife, but his opponent would not strike, so the brave was made a captive.

The victory being complete, the trappers turned their attention to the front again, and before long realized that a desperate attempt was being made to scale the cliff. Having failed to gain anything by descending into the valley, they were determined to make a last effort to accomplish their ends from below.

A constant fire was maintained from the woods beyond, so that no one could approach the edge openly, but Roaring Ralph, creeping forward, learned the truth when he saw dark forms toiling up the face of the cliff.

While he could admire the bravery that led these men to adopt such a bold course, still it did not alter the danger impending. He knew, however, that those who climbed up, when they reached the top, could not crawl over, because the rifles of the trappers commanded the point.

Time passed on. Two score of men, mostly Blackfeet, had gained a ledge just below the brink, and were only awaiting a signal to bound upon the rocks and rush forward.

This signal was never given, for, suddenly, from the forest below, there came a tremendous burst of trapper-yells, followed by rapid firing, and all the accompaniments of a fierce engagement, in which the allies were getting the worst of it.

Those who were upon the ledge now found themselves in a desperate situation, for below them they had a new band of enemies, while those above were rushing forward intent upon assailing them. Some of the doomed wretches started to descend the cliff again but a merciless fate was hovering over them.

Not a few lost their hold in the extreme hurry and went crashing to the base of the rocks, to be mangled and instantly killed. Others presented such fair marks to the trappers among the trees, being outlined against the white rocks with the bright moonlight showing their positions, that the crack of many a rifle was followed by a death-cry and the abrupt plunge of the victim down the giddy height. There were others still who were made the recipients of a shower of rocks from above that hurled them downward, and on the whole, those of the allies who had attempted to retreat met with a terrible fate.

A few of the boldest spirits, realizing the desperate nature of the case, sprung over the edge and engaged with those who immediately met them, so that, after all, there were quite a number of hand-to-hand fights upon the very verge of the valley.

Superior numbers soon overcame the few who had leaped so boldly upward, although, before they died they sent two of the trapper brigade along the dark journey to the unknown land.

The victory was complete.

From both brigades arose cheers of triumph, and in half an hour Ben Hardy and his men were in the camp. With them came gallant Nick Norris, who had gone for the reinforcements. All was now rejoicing, and when morning broke it found them ready for the day's work.

The dead were buried and the wounded cared for, those among the enemy to be set free just as soon as they were able to walk. From the captive Indian the secret pass to the top of the cliff was discovered, and after that it was deter-

mined to keep a guard there so that it would always be to their advantage.

Just at sundown the traitor spy was taken to a lonely ledge and hung to a jutting tree. The place was one which could be seen for miles toward the east, and the swinging body would be a warning to all evil-doers in the future.

It was a solemn and impressive scene.

The scoundrel kept up his bravado all through to the very last minute, and wasted the time granted him to pray in laughing and scoffing. He had run a long trail he said, a trail of fire, and it was but right that the blaze he had started should consume him, at last. He taunted every man with some black deed of the past by which he had been relieved of a brother or a chum, and actually gloried in the red crimes that formed this long trail of sin and wrong.

Hickory Harry, with so much reason to hate this man, could not bear to be present at his death, and so was spared much pain. He could never look up from the plains and see that ghastly form swinging to and fro at the mercy of the wind without a shudder.

Buckskin Bob grew heartily ashamed of the evil compact he had made with the spy, and as no one knew of it, he swore to himself that he would make amends in the future. Perhaps this determination was somewhat caused by the new dream that had come to him. He soon grew to love Kansas Kate, and the bold border lass returned his affection. Her life-work was done, her sister a happy wife instead of the occupant of a suicide's grave, and she could now turn her thoughts from war and revenge to the milder themes of peace and love. They made a good match, and Buckskin Bob never had reason to regret his choice.

Toby, the darky, became the life of the camp during the winter, and cooked them many a meal that brought to their recollection Eastern homes.

The season was one of great prosperity to the brigade, and when they departed for the fort in the spring, a wonderful quantity of pelts showed the result of their winter's work, for their agents had been kindly received at many Indian villages, and much trading was done with some of the very red-skins who had received such a drubbing during the earlier part of the winter.

Of course Hickory Harry and Birdie were married, and the young man revealed the fact that there had never been any need of his trapping for a living, as he had a snug fortune in the East. So they lived in a cosey residence at the fort, where the young man received an appointment from the ever generous North-West Company. Here Birdie had the companionship of her father almost half of the year, but Hickory Harry never trapped again, for, as the years sped on he found a little family growing up around him that required his constant care.

Kansas Kate was happy with her hunter husband; and Nick Norris, with his sweet wife, often visited the fort, where they were heartily received by the Hastings family.

As to our old trapper friends, Buffalo Rube has gone the way of all flesh, having fallen in some border fight, but Blue Bill and Roaring Ralph still roam the prairies, old men but vigorous as ever. The Colorado ranger still has his peculiar vocabulary, and when excited or amused will burst out with some of the queerest expressions ever heard. Now and then he has found occasion to make use of his ventriloquial powers, and this trick has helped him out of many a hard scrape.

He firmly believes to this day that the hardest customer he ever tried to manage and suppress was Black Toby, and the events of that tramp through the forest will ever remain a prominent recollection in the mind of the old trapper.

THE END.

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